The Water Is Wide Study Guide

The Water Is Wide by Pat Conroy

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Water is Wide is the story of Pat Conroy's experiences teaching for two years on the island of Yamacraw off the South Carolina coast. Pat documents his challenges not only with the underserved children living there but also with the administrators hired to educate them and elevate their lives.

In 1969, Pat Conroy waits to hear of his acceptance into the Peace Corps and hoping not to hear from the draft board which could send him to the war in Vietnam. When no word comes from either group, Pat applies for a job at a school on Yamacraw Island off the coast of South Carolina. Pat has spent a year teaching high school in Beaufort, South Carolina, where he himself went to high school but feels the need to do something for children who may need Pat's personal style and methods of humanitarian teaching.

Pat is rebellious not only in his teaching methods but also in his drive to take over the all-black class of seventh and eighth graders during a time of heated racism in the South. Pat admits to minor acts of racism as a boy and his growing up in a household and educational system where segregation rules. Pat's college days introduce him to new ideas and new friends who reject racism and vow to alter the system in ways that will impact people's lives.

Pat's willingness to take on the undesirable teaching position on Yamacraw at first meets with delight from the superintendent who believes Pat to be an answer to many prayers, and Pat is happily up for the challenge. What Pat finds at the school, though, would shock even the least results-oriented instructor. The children at the Yamacraw school are so isolated that their speech patterns, ignorance, and lack of fundamental information are glaring. After taking inventory of the woefully inadequate skill levels of the students, Pat realizes he cannot use traditional methods of instruction and eschews books for more interactive participation lessons.

Pat also takes the children on trips to the mainland to give them some exposure to the outside world, and the children change dramatically in their views toward learning. Pat's unusual teaching methods bring scorn from the other teacher on the island and eventually from the school's administrators.

Pat is fired from his teaching job but enlists the help of the parents who petition to retain Pat and he returns to teach for another year. Pat continues to use his unique teaching style and finds himself in trouble with the school's administrators once again. Pat is once again terminated and even the support of the parents does not help this time. Pat hires an attorney to fight a wrongful termination case, and the judge upholds the school district's decision to fire Pat even though the judge feels Pat's indiscretions do not warrant dismissal. It is the right of a school administration to fire any teacher it feels to be unfit for the position.

Pat philosophizes that he should have learned to be more obsequious toward the school's establishment in order to retain his position. As it is, Pat's self-respect is intact but he is not able to help the children. Pat also knows he was not able to dramatically change the knowledge levels of his students in the brief time he spent with them but hopes he has given them some experiences that will make their transition to the outside world just a little easier when that time comes.

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

The Water is Wide is the story of Pat Conroy's experiences teaching for two years on the island of Yamacraw off the South Carolina coast. Pat documents his challenges not only with the underserved children living there but also with the administrators hired to educate them and elevate their lives.

The book begins with the author, Pat Conroy, walking into the office of Dr. Henry Piedmont, the Superintendent of Schools in Beaufort, South Carolina. Pat is a school teacher and declares his interest in teaching on Yamacraw Island, an isolated island off the coast of South Carolina. Joining the Peace Corps had been Pat's plans at this point in his life, but he has not received any assignment from the organization yet and decides to teach the black children on Yamacraw instead. Dr. Piedmont is thrilled with Pat's decision because it is very difficult to find teachers who are interested in the challenge of teaching at this remote location.

Dr. Piedmont feels sure Jesus has delivered Pat to the school district and tells Pat about his own history and rise through the academic ranks once he got personal direction from Jesus. In spite of Dr. Piedmont's diatribe about his own successes and intestinal fortitude, Pat finds he likes the older man and is grateful for the teaching job.

Yamacraw Island is an island off the South Carolina mainland not far from Savannah, Georgia. The island is a natural wonder of forests, marshes and miles of shoreline complete with abundant wildlife and fish. Pat finds the island has been left behind by the twentieth century because it has not been touched by technology and has few modern conveniences. The people who live on Yamacraw Island are black and make their living by fishing and working small farms. The few white people on the island serve in roles such as school bus driver and radio operator.

As there is no bridge from the mainland to Yamacraw, accessibility is limited to water travel that must coincide with the rising and lowering of the tides because of the many sandbars in the area. The people of the island fear that life on the island is fading because the young people leave to live in the cities as soon as they are able. Oyster fishing used to provide plentiful employment for the island residents until an industrial factory in Savannah began dumping waste in the Savannah River which flowed onto the shores of Yamacraw and contaminating the oyster crops. This precipitated the exodus of 300 people off the island to find employment elsewhere.

Pat admits to being caught up in racism and the politics of growing up in the South in the 1960s and is ashamed of some of his teenaged behavior antagonizing black people. Pat's mother is a true Southerner raised in Georgia and his father is from Chicago, Illinois. The family's transient lifestyle of a Marine family let Pat experience several

Southern cities, and his family perpetuated the stereotypical racial prejudices of white people in the South.

Pat's family moves to Beaufort, South Carolina, in the early 1960s where he attends high school and then goes on to college at The Citadel, South Carolina's military college. After graduating with a teaching degree, Pat returns to Beaufort to teach high school in the same school he had attended just a few years before. Pat notices the integration of black students into the formerly all-white student body and senses a major change coming. Pat joins his friends, George Garbade, Mike Jones and Bernie Schein each night to watch the news about the war in Vietnam and then discuss politics all night. The four friends tour Europe one summer and find their credo of all men being essentially good sorely tested as they toured the concentration camps in Germany.

In 1968, after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Pat notices the vast difference in the reactions of the students: the white kids are impassive while the black students are outraged that the school will not formally recognize the loss of this man. As far as the black students were concerned, the death of Dr. King represented the death of all hope. From that point, Pat wrestles with the guilt of being a white man in a world that treats black people unjustly. Pat attempts to assuage some of the guilt by instituting a course on black history, and although he makes a noble attempt, he realizes he is not equipped to educate on the subject.

Pat is removed from his job as junior varsity basketball coach because the coach feels that he tends to favor the "coloreds." Pat receives similar exclusionary behavior from many of the other teachers and realizes he cannot fight the system anymore. Pat's friend, Bernie Schein, who is now an elementary school principal in nearby Port Royal tells Pat about the open teaching position at the school on Yamacraw. Bernie tells Pat that the students are all black, virtually cut off from the outside world and have been essentially ignored by the Beaufort school district.

Pat is escorted around the island by Ezra Bennington, the Deputy Superintendent of the Beaufort County school system. Ezra had been superintendent over all the schools until the recent consolidation of schools leaving Dr. Piedmont in the superintendent's seat. Ezra shares his frustrations over keeping the teaching positions filled on Yamacraw which now has two black teachers. No one wants to live on the island and commuting is not a feasible option because of the treacherous waters and shifting sandbars.

Pat meets Ted Stone, the white man who essentially runs the island because of his jobs of Game Warden, Magistrate, Director of Economic Opportunity, Warden of the Roads, Civil Defense Director and other titles. Ted's wife, Lou, works as the postmistress and school bus driver.

The Yamacraw Elementary School is located in an attractive white frame house guarded by massive trees which added shade and security. Ezra points out the nearby house of the retiring black teacher and then proceeds to gush about the other teacher, Mrs. Brown, a black woman, who will remain. Mrs. Brown is pleased to see Ezra who had championed her for her position. Mrs. Brown welcomes Pat to the school which she

calls working "overseas" because she feels like a missionary taking on the job of educating the unfortunate residents of Yamacraw.

When visiting the classroom, Pat realizes Mrs. Brown rules with a strict code because the children are mute in their fear of her. Pat also cannot help noticing Mrs. Brown's obsequious behavior toward Ezra. On the trip back to the mainland, Pat's core of humanitarianism glows and he decides to take the job.

On Pat's first night on the island, he sleeps in a sleeping bag on the schoolroom floor and marvels at the absolute dark and quiet, so different from his life in Beaufort. The next day, Mrs. Brown greets Pat with what will become her unrelenting lectures to him about the need to treat black children sternly because they do not respond to anything else. Pat introduces himself to the class as Mr. Conroy and soon several variations of his last name emerge and eventually he is affectionately referred to as Conrack.

Mrs. Brown intervenes and addresses the class as lazy babies with no potential, some of them even retarded. After Mrs. Brown takes the younger students to her classroom, Pat asks the students to write an autobiographical paper, but none of the children can do it. Pat finds that most do not know the alphabet, let alone how to read, and math is practically an unknown topic. When Pat tries to engage the students to speak and tell about themselves, he has a hard time even understanding them because their speech is so thick and broken.

At the end of the first day, Pat tries to engage the students once more by asking them to point out their location on a world map but not one child can come close to the actual site. The day ends with Mrs. Brown overloading Pat with paperwork because he is the principal of the school even though Pat had been told that Mrs. Brown is the school principal.

Pat acknowledges that he has never taught sixth and seventh graders but is appalled by the lack of knowledge in the Yamacraw school. As Pat playfully attempts to engage the kids on the second day, Mrs. Brown lectures him and gives him advice that these children need the whip more than they need to play. Pat is even more astonished that these kids don't know what country they live in, who the president is, or the name of the ocean that laps against their own island.

Frustrated by the glaring lack of basic skills among his students, Pat writes a letter to Dr. Piedmont in hopes that the superintendent will understand Pat's frustrations and remedy the situation. As the days pass into weeks Pat is continually amazed at how ignorant his students are on both historical and current events. Pat realizes that he must reach the students on their own terms so tries to bring them out of their shells by talking about their animals, about the island and music among other things.

When Friday ends his first week of teaching on Yamacraw, Pat is all too happy to head for the dock in Bluffton where Bernie picks him up to spend the weekend.

Conroy devotes the opening section of the book to establishing the social and political events of living in the South in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Racial segregation is the

standard, especially in schools, and hate crimes are still prevalent especially in the South. Conroy grows up in a bigoted household and admits to participating in racial harassment when he was a teenager, but he learns the futility of such behavior and finds friends after college who believe in the humanitarian aspects of life. Although Conroy is committed to trying to make a difference in his work, he also realizes that the established patterns of racial segregation are firmly entrenched in the fabric of the South and he is nearly impotent to alter them. Conroy wants to make a difference in the world, and hoping to be selected by the Peace Corps and not the draft board, he elects to teach the grossly underprivileged children on Yamacraw Island. This is Conroy's first encounter with teaching black children and he has a difficult time understanding their speech. He has an ever harder time understanding the obsequious behavior of Mrs. Brown, the black woman teaching the lower level grades at Yamacraw. There is deep irony in Conroy's appreciation for Dr. Piedmont and Ezra Bennington as the relationships will dramatically change by the end of the book.

Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

Pat finds the school library woefully inadequate filled with donated books that adults would read, not children. The public library is even more irrelevant because people have stopped donating because the island residents do not access it. Pat understands this completely because most of the people on Yamacraw cannot read. Someone the children relates to is the music performer James Brown and one of the students, Top Cat, leaps at the chance to perform Brown's songs whenever possible.

Pat introduces the children to classical music through records, and they listen to the news on a Savannah radio station every morning. Pat points out on the map when countries are mentioned on the broadcasts and tries to give some context to the area such as Brazil being the world's largest coffee producer. After awhile, the students are able to respond to Pat's pep rally style of engaging them, and he endures Mrs. Brown's disciplinary looks. After a month of teaching, the students can identify the letters of the alphabet and are able to read some simple words.

At the end of each school day, Pat loads up on mosquito repellent and takes self-guided tours of the island. Amid the swamps and forests, Pat finds an abandoned house with a huge Confederate flag displayed outside, and he marvels at how these people cling steadfastly to a symbol that has no modern day relevance. Pat also finds ten miles of unpopulated beach where he swims naked in the surf and lets the water wash away the frustrations of the classroom.

Each day Pat also picks up his mail at the home of Ted and Lou Stone where he invariable runs into Ted who always wants to talk about the school and the island people. Ted is a consummate rugged outdoorsman complete with a personal arsenal that reminds Pat to stay on Ted's good side. Lou is a very competent woman and joins her husband in the belief that Mrs. Brown is the savior of the island for teaching the "nigra" children some much-needed manners.

Before long, Pat learns that Ted served in World War II and would be glad to still be killing Germans if the world would let him. One night while watching the evening news with Ted, Pat witnesses Ted spewing venomous words at the TV screens when watching the Vietnam War demonstrators marching outside the White House. Ted feels sure that if George Wallace had been elected president instead of Richard Nixon, those demonstrators would have been wiped out with flame throwers and tanks.

Although Pat is worlds apart from the Stones in his ideologies and background, he is careful to remain friendly because Pat docks his boat at their dock and relies on them for communication with the outside world. Pal also forms a friendship with Zeke Skimberry, the maintenance man for the Beaufort school district. Zeke is in charge of maintaining Pat's boat; Pat finds Zeke to be one of the friendliest people he has ever

met. Zeke moved to Bluffton after a divorce in California and marries Ida McKee, a cashier in a local Bluffton store. Zeke is aligned closely with Ezra Bennington and feels his job may be in jeopardy now that Ezra's position with the school district is a little less secure.

Pat parks his car at the Skimberry house in Bluffton during the week and finds himself invited to meals and conversations on a regular basis. Pat's friendship with Zeke and Ida grows as the school year progresses and they come to think of Pat as a member of the Skimberry family.

Pat's frustration over living in the island schoolhouse grows as the weeks pass by; one night Pat sees a man staring in at him. Frightened by the intrusion, Pat spends a sleepless night only to learn that the man is Mad Billie, the island's resident crazy person who does odd jobs around the island and enjoys being the island lunatic. Pat is soon able to move to the home of Viola Buckner, a woman whose cancer diagnosis prohibits her from returning to the island. Although the gingerbread style house is more cluttered than he would have preferred, Pat is overjoyed to find a working commode and considers himself lucky.

Pat has many acquaintances on the island but no friends and misses his life in Beaufort. The loneliness, coupled with Pat's inability to make any real difference in the lives of the Yamacraw children, makes Pat wish for a way out of his situation. It is at this time that Pat is surprised to find himself in love and married soon after to a woman named Barbara Bolling Jones.

Barbara had been a neighbor of Pat's when Pat lived in an apartment in an historic area of Beaufort called The Point. Pat learned that Barbara was pregnant and her husband had been killed in Vietnam. Shortly after Barbara has her baby, Pat meets Barbara formally at a party in May and they are married in October. The couple honeymoons on Yamacraw and Barbara is pleased to leave the island after only two days. Pat and Barbara rent a house in Beaufort and Pat, who feels responsible for his new wife and her now sixth-month-old daughter, Melissa, and two-year-old daughter, Jessica, makes the decision to commute to the island school every day.

Pat's best humanitarian efforts are tested by his experience so far on the island. The gap between well-intentioned Beaufort residents and the Yamacraw residents is so large that Pat does not feel equipped to bridge the differences. For example, Pat finds many classic works of literature by authors such as Hemingway, Faulkner and Melville lining the shelves of the paltry library, but they sit unused because most Yamacraw residents do not know how to read. Pat reasons that even if the islanders could read the words, they could not understand the books because the contents have no personal relevance for the people of Yamacraw. Pat is handicapped by several things: he has only taught high school level students in the past; he has never taught black children, and he is alienated from friends and forced to rely on adult conversation from adults who, while trying to curb their racial prejudices, find themselves slipping into old patterns of a vengeful, violent South. It is clear that Pat's middle-class upbringing also

separates him from the people on Yamacraw, and he struggles to find a common ground on which to reach his students and make adult friends.

Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

One day Pat finds a movie projector buried in a closet at the school and shows the children educational films and documentaries, much to the chagrin of Mrs. Brown who thinks Pat's showing films is a colossal waste of time and state funds. Mrs. Brown is even less enthused when Pat resurrects an old tape recorder and lets the children take turns speaking into it and enjoying their stories on tape.

In October two boys named Jim Ford and Joe Sanfort from Cowell College in California arrive at the school to assist Pat. Jim and Joe are participating in a sociology program designed to help the islanders, especially the children, and the program has repeatedly met with the resistance of Mrs. Brown in the past. Jim and Joe find it difficult to reach the children academically so they institute a recreation program that meets with better success.

Pat discovers he must also teach life lessons to his students when he learns of the widespread cruelty toward animals including pets. Pat is appalled when one of the boys cuts off the back legs of a frog just to watch it bleed to death. There is always talk in the classroom of boys shooting each other's dogs; Pat tries to intervene but realizes that living off the land has desensitized the children to animals and he is helpless in changing any of their habits.

Toward the end of October Pat talks to the class about Halloween complete with ghosts and witches and finds that this is no holiday because the children firmly believe that spirits from the other world live around them every day and create much anxiety for the islanders. Pat has fond memories of going trick or treating as a boy and wants his students to enjoy the experience, too. So Pat launches a plan to take the kids to Beaufort for trick or treat and a night spent on the mainland.

Bernie Schein and Barbara join in the planning and make arrangements for the Yamacraw kids to attend the Halloween party in her classroom and ride on a float in the Beaufort Halloween parade. The kids are very enthused about the idea of getting free candy and spending a night in the city, but the parents are not as open to the idea. Mrs. Brown firmly denies permission for the students to go, but Pat visits each of the parents himself in order to secure permission slips for the outing.

One of the staunchest opponents to the trip is an elderly woman named Edna who cares for her grandchildren, three of whom are in Pat's class; she does not want to lose the children to the river which has swallowed up several of her relatives. Eventually Pat is able to convince Edna that the kids will be safe and she relents giving her permission.

The day of the outing dawns with a misty rain, but the shrimp boat enlisted to transport the children arrives and the kids make it to the mainland. One of the girls falls and cuts

her leg but other than that there are no major injuries and the kids enjoy a carnival, the parade and the sheer joy of getting candy from strangers during trick or treat. The island children are not able to return home the next day due to torrential rains and spend the night eating candy and trying to sleep.

On the next school day, Mrs. Brown launches a passive aggressive attack by addressing Pat's class and demanding to know which one of the boys wet the wrestling mat serving as a mattress when the kids stayed the extra night in the Beaufort school. None of the boys admits to the deed, and Mrs. Brown leaves in a huff. All the children know who did it but say nothing to protect a friend from Mrs. Brown's further indignities.

Pat's reputation and standing among the islanders increases after the successful Halloween trip, and the students become even more attentive during lessons. Pat is still perplexed, though, about his role at the school and how to best measure any success. Pat knows from his own upbringing that children learn from parents, and he must interject himself somehow into the cycle of the Yamacraw parents and children in order to make any difference. Pat continues his work with the overall purpose of preparing the Yamacraw children to meet the world as successfully as possible when their time comes to leave the island.

One of the important things to note about Conroy, in addition to his open spirit and persistence, is his sense of humor. He engages the children by making them laugh both at himself and at themselves in order to break the invisible barrier between his world and theirs. It is Conroy's instincts that let him know that the kids need some joy in their lives in order to let down their guards enough to learn and to experience just a small amount of the pleasure that other children their ages take for granted. Conroy is able to view all his experiences with the adults, even Mrs. Brown, with a restrained humor which puts all encounters in perspective with his overall goal. In one instance, when the California boys have come to help on the island, the people assign them the job of making outhouses, a gross waste of their intellectual talents, but they comply because they are on Yamacraw to help in any way they can. Conroy writes, "Joe and Jim, archetypes of white, middle-class America, could come to the thickets and backwaters of the Carolinas and master the art of shit-house building. Dear Mom, Sallie May Toomer now craps in elegance and style, so my life has not been in vain." (Chapter 5, Page 122) It is this sarcastic sense of humor which allows Conroy to put his experience in perspective with his life overall and maintain what he hopes to do for the children in spite of overwhelming circumstances working against him.

Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

During the first two months at the school, Pat tries to ignore the sounds of beatings coming from Mrs. Brown's classroom on a daily basis. For years Mrs. Brown instilled fear into students with the leather straps she named Dr. Discipline and Professor Medicine. Pat does not believe in corporal punishment but does not interfere with Mrs. Brown's manner of discipline and tries to keep his students from doing anything that will incur Mrs. Brown's wrath.

Despite Mrs. Brown's despotic behavior, Pat finds her to very humorous although he is sure she does not try to be. One day, Pat sees one of the boys named Prophet, hanging from the water tank fixed eight feet above the floor in the boys' bathroom. Pat does not say anything to Prophet but Mrs. Brown launches into a verbal attack on Prophet that has Pat laughing convulsively. '"Well, boy, there must be some reason for you holding on to the pot every time you tinkle, son. What's the matter, boy? Is your pinky so big that you have to hold the bowl 'cause you are afraid you might fall in? Prophet. You answer me, boy. Is your pinky that big? Are you top-heavy because of that big ol' pinky between your legs? I haven't noticed you stumbling around the schoolyard when you walk. And I ain't heard none of the boys talking about Prophet using his pinky as a baseball bat.'" Chapter 7, Page 181 Pat receives instructions from Mrs. Brown to inspect Prophet but does not follow through with the directives and the episode ends.

Pat realizes that physical force from Mrs. Brown seems to serve as the best way to quiet the class, but Pat does not want to resort to violent behavior. Instead of whipping the kids with a belt, Pat decides to arm wrestle them for dominance, and the tactic works beautifully, especially with the boys who are always looking for another method by which to dominate another boy. Another trick Pat shows the students is something he used to do as a boy: milking the rat. Milking the rat involves pressing the fingernail and joint of your subject with thumb and forefinger in such a way as to inflict tremendous pain. The boys marvel at this new technique which proves to be painful and always available to them.

At the end of October Pat gives up the Buckner house both because he wants to be with his family and also because the rats from the outside fields are coming indoors. Pat learns to enjoy the daily round trips from Beaufort, and by the time January comes, Pat is the only moving object anywhere near the river. On the winter days, Pat hunches down to avoid the cold wind and manages well until a bitter cold spell that freezes over his windshield and the icy rain bites his face. One other time Pat gets lost in the fog and calmly waits for it to lift until pressing forward and finding himself five miles off course nearing the Savannah River.

When spring comes, the administration decides to put air conditioning in the Yamacraw school and loads down Pat's boats with tools and materials to be transported. Zeke

rides with Pat while the electricians take a separate boat. Before long, Pat's boat, weighed down by the materials, hits a sandbar and Pat and Zeke cannot rock the boat loose. Zeke continues on with the electricians while Pat stays in his boat waiting for the tide to rise to float him back on course, but not before a Savannah helicopter rescue team spots Pat and lowers a man to inspect the situation only to have Pat awaken from sleep and anger the rescuer who thought Pat was dead.

It is at this time that Pat feels he is angering the school's administration, a state which has not been helped by Pat's ardent letter sent to Dr. Piedmont earlier in the year. The administration launches its first fire at Pat by claiming that Pat has spent too much money on gasoline bills for boat transportation. This is Pat's first encounter with Howard Sedgwick, the principal of Bluffton High School and the man now serving as liaison between Dr. Piedmont and the school staff. Dr. Piedmont is a firm believer in the chain of command in administrations and shares his displeasure with Pat's expenses through Howard.

Pat counters that his gas expenses increased because he is no longer living on the island but is commuting each day in order to live with his family. In addition, Pat has carried books, movies, guests and many other supplies to the school via his daily trips. Pat indicates that he plans to be present at the next school board meeting to discuss the situation.

On the day before the school board meeting, a group of men are present including Ezra Bennington, a school board member named Mr. Miller, and Morgan Randel, the father of Pat's best friend from high school who died during a high school baseball game. Pat and Mr. Randel are good friends and Dr. Piedmont had sent him along with the other two men knowing Pat would be incapable of pursuing his plan to appear at the school board meeting if Mr. Randel was part of the group telling Pat not to come. Pat realizes that he has been temporarily beaten.

In December Pat receives a letter from Dr. Piedmont asking Pat to attend a meeting with him and Howard Sedgwick to discuss the gas bill situation. On the appointed day Dr. Piedmont does not show up and sends Ezra Bennington instead. When the topic of the exorbitant gas bill comes up, Pat counters with the fact that he is the only teacher who must drive a boat to work. Howard tells Pat that the school will pay for gas on Mondays and Fridays to deliver Pat to the island and get him home at the end of the week. When Pat threatens to walk out, Howard and Ezra agree to pay the gas bill.

In this section Pat must address the issue of discipline both physical and mental. For weeks Pat has pushed down his revulsion for Mrs. Brown's manner of physical punishment, but he reaches a point where he is ready to confront her on it. The sounds of children being whipped and beaten in her classroom stop all activity in his own, and Pat realizes that his students live in fear of Mrs. Brown's wrath. It occurs to Pat that the lack of responsiveness in his students comes as much from their lack of proper teaching as it does from fear of saying the wrong thing in Mrs. Brown's presence. Pat feels a sense of this fear himself when the reprimands begin to flow down from the school's administrative office. As a liberal humanitarian faced with an impossible teaching

situation every day, Pat prizes his sense of commitment and duty and is outraged when the administrators do not support his efforts and chastise him for what they feel are unnecessary expenses. Pat also learns the valuable life lesson of politics and the chain of command in large organizations, which is counter to his hands-on manner of addressing situations. Ironically, it is the same passion which allows Pat to be a good teacher for Yamacraw and also stand up to the administrators which will be his downfall there.

Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

The boys at the school enjoy playing basketball each day so when Pat learns that the Harlem Globetrotters are coming to Charleston for a performance, he begins to make plans to take the boys. With the help of Barbara and Bernie, Pat transports most of the boys to the arena in Charleston where they thoroughly enjoy seeing their basketball heroes in real life.

Throughout the school year Pat introduces the kids to many of his own friends who are interested in the school and life on the island. Some of the kids' favorites include Pat's sister who performs dramatic skits, Peter who teaches the kids how to play soccer and Richie who woos the girls with his singing.

Violence continues to permeate the lives of the Yamacraw kids as they still torture their animals and Pat lectures them again. Pat begins to understand the tendency toward violence when the mother of one of the girls shows up at school one day to tell her daughter that her husband broke a chair over her back and threatened to kill her. Pat takes the woman to her home to retrieve a few personal items and deposits the woman at her mother's home. Before long, Pat learns that the husband and wife have reunited.

As a gesture of levity, Barbara hosts the Yamacraw girls at the Conroy home for a Valentine's overnight party. The girls are in awe of the size of the Conroy house and are sure that ghosts and restless spirits still roam there. In an attempt to bring the girls to their senses, Pat pretends to be overcome by a murderous ghost which completely frightens them and brings Barbara's admonitions onto his head. In March a death of a woman on Yamacraw introduces Pat to the customs and funeral rituals of the islanders, and he better understands the fears of the children.

During the winter months Pat is restless because he cannot take the children off the island for any more learning experiences. One day he finds a letter buried in a stack of materials dumped on him by Mrs. Brown. The letter is from a woman in Falls Church, Virginia, who had offered help to the students of Yamacraw after listening to a Senate subcommittee meeting on hunger in America. The letter had been written a year ago, but Pat writes back in hopes that the woman's offer still stands.

The woman is delighted to be able to help and offers her home as well as the homes of some friends if Pat wants to bring the children to Washington, D.C. Pat lines up the accommodations and travel arrangements just as he had done with all the other trips and spends an entire month visiting each of the children's parents to secure permission. True to form, Mrs. Brown does not grant permission for the trip, so Pat secures the approval he needs from Dr. Piedmont himself. On the first Monday in May the Yamacraw crew sets off for Washington and Pat sees the journey and the destination through the unspoiled eyes of the island children.

The story is about to peak as Pat continues to violate the traditional methods of educating students. Pat's refusal to honor Mrs. Brown's rules also will mean problems for Pat, who ignores the chain of command and goes directly to Dr. Piedmont for approval. While achieving a small victory with Piedmont, Pat will very soon see that Piedmont is conspiring for Pat's demise within the school system. Pat has some sense of foreboding when he tells the reader that he knows his days on the island seem numbered. This technique is called foreshadowing and it means that the author drops hints for the reader of events that will come to pass before the end of the story. Conroy is also wistful about the value he has brought to the children during this year and knows he has not created scholars but hopes that he has prepared them in some small way for their transitions into the "real" world.

Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary and Analysis

Finally the end of the school arrives and graduation is held on an early June morning in the schoolyard at Yamacraw. Ezra Bennington gives the graduation address and Pat and the children give Zeke Skimberry a book in thanks for the help he provided all year. The next week Pat and Barbara take a few of the children to a camp in Bluffton for swimming lessons and are amazed that children who live surrounded by water do not know how to swim. On Friday of that week Pat receives a call from Howard Sedgwick relieving Pat of his teaching position.

The next day Pat goes to see Dr. Piedmont who tells Pat that Pat has been late too many times the past year and that Pat continues to charge his boat gas to the school system. Pat counters that he had been late a few times because of dense fog on his morning commute and that Howard had said the school would pay for the gas for the boat. Dr. Piedmont continues that he cannot defend paying for Pat's fuel when he is not paying for fuel for all the other teachers. Pat tells Dr. Piedmont that he pays for his own gas when he drives from Beaufort to Bluffton to the dock but there is no other way for him to get to his classroom than with a boat, something none of the other teachers has to address.

Pat leaves Dr. Piedmont's office after arguing for quite awhile, and then he and his friend, Bernie, go to Yamacraw to tell the parents what has happened in the hopes the parents will raise a petition to keep Pat. Pat is pleased that the parents do sign and some even add heartfelt letters to the document.

At the school board meeting, Pat briefly relates his experience of teaching on the island for the past year including the gross level of ignorance he found there. Dr. Piedmont counterattacks with the list of Pat's errant behavior which is met by an angry outburst from the audience including some of the Yamacraw parents and Pat's own mother. Dr. Piedmont calls an executive session and Pat later learns that the gas money for his boat has been approved.

Pat begins the new school year in September and minimizes his encounters with the administrators. Pat does inform Dr. Piedmont that he will teach only one more year on the island, not so much for what has happened to him but because the island teachers think that white teachers are no good for their children. The school year passes much like the first one complete with irregular teaching styles and class trips. Pat's fatal mistake is leaving the class in the capable hands of a teaching assistant while he visits a school system in another district where he has been offered a job.

When Pat returns he receives a phone call from Dr. Piedmont relieving Pat of his job at the Yamacraw school. Once again Pat enlists the help of the Yamacraw parents who supply testimonials to support Pat's remaining at the island school. The parents take the

issue one step further and strike, not sending their children to school. The administrators threaten the parents with legal and financial attacks and the parents have no other recourse but to relent. The boycott reaches the local media, which also cover the resulting school board meeting where it is voted that Pat's termination be upheld. Pat takes his case to court, and despite the judge's incredulity at the charges, the judge upholds the school district's decision because it is their right to fire any teacher they consider to be unfit for the position.

Pat withdraws from the fray to write this book and philosophizes that he has moved through the bitterness of the experience and realizes there will always be issues he will have to accept when working in a dynamic with other people. Pat feels no special malice toward Dr. Piedmont or Ezra Bennington; he just feels that they are incredibly mediocre people not up to the challenge of the situation they had been charged with directing. Pat acknowledges that the prejudices of the Old South are slowly melting away and knows he did not have the chance to impact the lives of the children dramatically in the brief time he spent with them. He hopes that the river will be kind to them when it comes their turn to cross.

Pat's experience at Yamacraw is a classic example of someone with radical ideas entering a situation with the highest hopes of altering the situation for the better. Although he was hired to do a job, it was expected that Pat would carry on the routines and methods in place and not cause any trouble. Yamacraw school was low on the administration's priority list and by providing the fundamental necessities, the school district is within compliance of state requirements which is satisfactory to the board. Pat is considered a radical because he wants more for the children, and when that fact is brought to light, the administrators have to remove Pat before he reveals any more of their flaws and inadequacies. The ending situation is tragic, not because Pat loses his job, but because the children of Yamacraw are destined to an illiterate and ignorant fate because they are isolated from the world and at the mercy of the people who are hired to elevate their conditions and do not.

Characters

Pat Conroy (Conrack) (C'roy)

Pat Conroy is the narrator and the author of this autobiographical story. Pat is a Southern man raised in a military family which settles in Beaufort, South Carolina. Pat attends school in Beaufort and goes to college at The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina. After college, Pat returns to Beaufort where he teaches high school for a year. The burgeoning Civil Rights Movement in the country, and especially the South, guides Pat's humanitarian instincts and he signs up to work for the Peace Corps. When Pat does not get an assignment from that organization, he applies for a job teaching black children on an island called Yamacraw off the coast of South Carolina. The children are woefully ignorant of the world outside the island and Pat cannot help comparing his own childhood and education that gave him not only the basics but also the hunger to learn more about the world. Pat's ability to adapt to his situation, coupled with a great sense of humor, lets him establish a foundation on which he provides experiences that allow his students to grow. Pat comes to be loved by his students who affectionately call him Mr. Conrack, Conrack and sometimes just C'roy. Pat admits that his Irish temper gets him into trouble but cannot help being righteously angry when he is forced out of his job for behavior perceived as inappropriate by an administration that is completely out of touch with not only the immediate needs of the Yamacraw students but the changing landscape of segregation and racism in the Old South.

Dr. Henry Piedmont

Dr. Henry Piedmont is the Superintendent of Schools for the Beaufort, South Carolina, school district, having been in the position for only one year. Dr. Piedmont is a native Southerner raised by God-fearing people who worked in a mill. Dr. Piedmont himself worked in the mill before and after college until he receives a message from God telling Dr. Piedmont to get an advanced degree so he can leave the mill and help more people. Dr. Piedmont is a very religious man who believes Jesus sent Pat as an answer to many prayers about t finding a teacher for the children on Yamacraw island. At the beginning of the story, Dr. Piedmont praises Pat for being full of energy and new ideas, just as Piedmont was at Pat's age. As the story unfolds and Pat's unusual teaching methods and disregard for Dr. Piedmont's beloved chain of command in his administration, Dr. Piedmont turns against Pat and terminates him. Baffled by the support for Pat, Dr. Piedmont allows Pat to return to teach another year but by the end of the second year, Dr. Piedmont cannot tolerate Pat's lack of obedience and what he perceives to be radical behavior and terminates Pat again, a decision upheld by a judge's decision. Pat does not harbor ill will toward Dr. Piedmont; instead, Pat pities him for being a relic of the Old South which is dying in the 1960s.

Ezra Bennington

Ezra Bennington is the elderly Deputy Superintendent of the Beaufort County school system. Ezra had been the superintendent of the entire district until the consolidation of all schools in the county and the appointment of Dr. Piedmont to the superintendent's position. Conroy writes, "Ezra Bennington was the perfect name for him. He had a finely chiseled, fashionably wrinkled face that suggested integrity and character. His blue eyes were liquid and innocent. A gray mane covered his head. Ezra was Everyman's grandfather. He would look good dressed in a white linen suit, rocking on a high verandah, shouting orders to Negroes working in the garden." Chapter 2, Page 18 Ezra is in a delicate situation because he has been demoted from his position as superintendent of schools by the arrival of Dr. Piedmont. Ezra is a kind man but is woefully out of touch with the changes coming in society, especially those rocking the segregation issues in the Old South. Ezra essentially is a dutiful man who had done his job while trying to maintain peace in an era noisily demanding radical change.

Mrs. Brown

Mrs. Brown is the black woman who is the other teacher at the Yamacraw Elementary School. Pat describes her as, "A large woman, she had great pendulous bosoms and huge sinewy arms and a handsome, expressive face. She was light-skinned and laughed a great deal. Everything about her seemed exaggerated and blown out of proportion." Chapter 2, Page 23 Mrs. Brown is quick to inform people that she is very different from the black people on Yamacraw because she has Cherokee Indian blood and comes from Georgia where she was educated in a private school. Mrs. Brown is a favorite teacher of the school administrators because she is obedient and liberally applies whippings to students as a common form of discipline. Although Pat abhors some of Mrs. Brown's methods, he finds her a pitiable person because she is convinced that black children need to be whipped in order to understand and also because the parents feel that Mrs. Brown is not a competent teacher because she is black. Ironically, Mrs. Brown suffers from racial prejudices among people of her own race in a similar way as black people on the mainland are targeted by whites.

Barbara Bolling Jones Conroy

Barbara Bolling Jones Conroy is Pat's wife whom he marries in October of 1969 during his first year of teaching on Yamacraw. Barbara had been a neighbor of Pat's in Beaufort, and he gets to know her better after her first husband is killed in Vietnam. Barbara is also a teacher and supports Pat's efforts on Yamacraw even hosting parties for the children in the Conroy home and assisting with the trips Pat organizes for his students. Although Barbara does not have a direct role in this book, her presence is very much felt as she supports her husband and participates in improving the lives of the children of Yamacraw in any way she can.

Ted Stone

Ted Stone is the white man who essentially runs Yamacraw Island because of his jobs of Game Warden, Magistrate, Director of Economic Opportunity, Warden of the Roads, Civil Defense Director and other titles. , "Ted was the quintessential outdoorsman. He hunted religiously, fished expertly, and shrimped the waters off Yamacraw to supplement his already sizable income. I would often come in his yard to find the carcass of a deer strung from a tree, the carnage of the hunt in evidence all around, guts littering the ground, and Ted sitting proudly on a lawn chair. He could do things with his hands very well. He could plow a field, milk a cow, gut a hog, cook a trout, clean a rifle—all the things that made us such complete opposites." Chapter 4, Page 76

Lou Stone

Lou Stone is Ted Stone's wife who works as the island postmaster and school bus driver. "A lover of flowers and solitude, she seemed perfectly adapted to the Spartan existence on Yamacraw. She drove the school bus as proudly and as competently as Junior Johnson drives his stock cars. She delivered mail daily, depending upon the weather and her mood." Chapter 4, Page 76

Zeke Skimberry

Zeke Skimberry is the maintenance man for the Beaufort school district. Zeke befriends Pat, and he and his wife become almost like family members for Pat during his time commuting to Yamacraw.

George Garbade, Mike Jones and Bernie Schein

George Garbade, Mike Jones and Bernie Schein are college friends of Pat's. The four friends tour Europe together and then attend Pat's wedding to Barbara in the fall of 1969. Because of his positions held at schools close to Pat's, Bernie is able to provide support and opportunities for the Yamacraw children.

Babies

Mrs. Brown calls the students in the school babies both as a term of endearment and derision.

Mary, Cindy Lou, Carolina, Ethel

Mary, Cindy Lou, Carolina and Ethel are the girls in Pat's seventh and eighth grade class.

Top Cat, Fred, George, Samuel, Sidney, Saul, Lincoln, Prophe

Top Cat, Fred, George, Samuel, Sidney, Saul, Lincoln, Prophet, Jasper, and Richard are the boys in Pat's seventh and eighth grade class.

Mad Billie

Mad Billie is Yamacraw's resident lunatic who enjoys doing odd jobs and scaring Pat whenever he can.

Jim Ford and Joe Sanfort

Jim Ford and Joe Sanfort are students from Cowell College in California who are participating in a sociology program to help the residents and students of Yamacraw.

Howard Sedgwick

Howard Sedgwick is the principal of Bluffton High School and also serves as a liaison between Dr. Piedmont and the rest of the school staff.

Morgan Randel

Morgan Randel is the head of administration and personnel for the Beaufort school district and is also the father of Pat's best high school friend who died during a high school baseball game.

The Harlem Globetrotters

Pat takes some of the Yamacraw boys to Charleston to watch a performance by the famous Harlem Globetrotters basketball performers.

Objects/Places

Beaufort, South Carolina

Beaufort, South Carolina, is the town where Pat grows up, attends high school, and returns to live and teach high school after college.

Yamacraw Island

Yamacraw Island is located off the mainland coast of South Carolina.

Savannah, Georgia

Yamacraw is situated close to Savannah; the island residents go there for shopping and medical care.

The Citadel

The Citadel is a military college located in Charleston, South Carolina, and attended by Pat Conroy.

Port Royal, South Carolina

Bernie Schein is the principal of an elementary school in Port Royal where Pat and his wife, Barbara, buy a home.

Yamacraw Eleentary School

The Yamacraw Elementary School is located in a white frame house and is surrounded by rows of massive trees providing shade and security.

Bluffton, South Carolina

Bluffton is the site of Zeke Skimberry's home where Pat leaves his car during the week when he is on the island.

Viola Buckner's House

Pat rents the home of Viola Buckner, a woman whose diagnosis of cancer prohibits her from returning to her island home.

The Point

The Point is an historic area of Beaufort where Pat has an apartment in one of the beautiful antebellum homes.

Dr. Discipline and Professor Medicine

Mrs. Brown always carries with her two leather straps she has named Dr. Discipline and Professor Medicine.

Social Sensitivity

In The Water Is Wide, Conroy allows the reader a glimpse of his own experiences as a young Southern teacher who attempts to affect changes among virulently prejudiced South Carolina whites in the early 1970s. While his first person account serves as a journal of sorts, emphasizing Conroy's own emotional reactions to the conditions he must overcome to serve as an effective teacher, it also speaks to his personal development. He allows his own developing self awareness to contrast with the stagnation of attitudes that represents the resistance to change in the early days of integration. Raised as a racist himself, Conroy frankly confronts his own often misplaced feelings of guilt over his unenlightened past in a present in which he desperately wants to help correct what he sees as an abhorrent social system. The local superintendent's words upon learning that Conroy wants to teach at the allblack school on Yamacraw Island, "Jesus made you come to me today," foreshadows the narrator's future struggle in distinguishing between his own destiny and that of the island's children.

Through his self-narration, Conroy acts as a chronicler for his times, using white stereotypical characters in a manner that allows his readers to recognize resemblances to themselves.

While autobiographical, the novel retains the air of fiction, avoiding the objective historical approach. His study of the importance of values, and the resistance to change within American society, holds up well for readers who now have the advantage of perspective upon the times and inclinations featured in the novel.

Techniques

The general form of The Water Is Wide is that of the autobiography. The novel is told in first person, with the author as the narrator; he also identifies himself as the main character. The novel might more firmly be placed within the tradition of "memoir," as it covers less than two years of the author's experiences. The first-person approach creates a limited point of view, but that works well for this particular novel, in which exist the parallel themes of academic education of the children, and social and political education for the author. Although the main character is not a child, the novel could still be classified as a coming-ofage novel, in which the narrator learns through bitter experience the realities of a world directed by superstition, prejudice and ignorance.

Conroy seems to present an honest picture of his efforts, emphasizing the self-aggrandizing aspects of his personality at the novel's opening, and his own ignorance in dealing with what amounts to a different culture than his own. In dealing with first person narration, the reader should always suspect the narrator's trustworthiness.

Such trust seems warranted in the instance of Conroy's novel.

In his novel may be seen many aspects of that type of writing which has been labeled "Southern." The themes, including religion and prejudice, are typical of the Southern novel, as are some of the more outlandish characterizations. Southerners are typically accepting of those among them with aberrant personalities; this shows up in Conroy's presentation of the island's perpetually grim victim of insanity, who smiles only when galloping horseback about the grounds. The author's characters find themselves embroiled not only with modern-day struggles, but also with problems inherited from a troubled regional past. The Southern attitude toward blacks, which might be summed up as "love the individual, hate the group" is most apparent in this book.

Yet Conroy manages to avoid the cliches which might dull his presentation. This is accomplished as he sees the long-time Southern situation through new eyes. The character Conroy is an idealist, but he is also a realist. While he craves the vision of the better life he imagines for the island children, he realizes that defeat constantly lurks around the corner in the form of the prejudicial Southern school system. He remains naive enough to allow the reader to support his hopes for a better future for the downtrodden, yet real enough for the reader to share his frustrations over encountering the proverbial brick wall.

Themes

Racism

The book is written about the time period of the mid to late 1960s in America when the Civil Rights Movement is peaking, characterized by radical behaviors and shifts in perceptions in the whole country but especially in the South where racism is notoriously widespread. Pat Conroy is admittedly part of the Old South prejudices which perpetuate the practice of racism in all aspects of society. It is not until Pat has graduated college that he begins to explore alternate behaviors and ways of thinking to begin the elimination of racism in the South. Unfortunately, Pat's naiveté encounters members of the rigid school establishment fighting against desegregation and clinging to the old ways of life where they could keep black people in their designated places and live in what they perceive to be the natural order of things. Ironically, Pat encounters black parents on Yamacraw who feel Pat is a better teacher for their children than the black woman teacher also working at the school just because Pat is a white man. This form of reverse discrimination is unsettling to Pat who feels he cannot teach in this type of environment because his presence denies respect to the current, and any future, black professional who takes a teaching position on Yamacraw.

Isolation

Isolation is a major theme in the book for its impact on the Yamacraw students and on Pat. To begin with, the students and parents of the island are geographically isolated from the mainland by a 20-mile boat trip into Bluffton, South Carolina, or Savannah, Georgia. Appropriate transportation is not easily accessible to the island residents, so trips to the mainland are rare and usually involve an emergency or necessary trip. Visits to the city just to explore or enjoy are not part of the Yamacraw lifestyle. In fact, the lack of opportunity to cross the river leaves many of the adults fearful of the river itself so they prevent their children from crossing unless absolutely necessary. Couple this innate fear of reaching land with the exclusion these black people are sure to find once they reach the mainland, and they are doubly isolated from society and any educational and social opportunities. Pat does his best to integrate his students into life on the mainland in an effort to acclimate them to life beyond what they know, but he is handicapped by a society clinging to racial prejudice and doing all it can to maintain the status quo of white supremacy.

Survival

Survival is a way of life for the people on Yamacraw, and Pat is also faced with it for the first time in his life during his two years of teaching on the island. Because Yamacraw is an isolated place, the people who live there must be very resourceful and most make their living by working small farms or raising animals. Most of the food consumed is

what can be grown locally or fish caught in the river. The jobs of planting, harvesting and fishing consume the lives of these people just so that they can feed their children. There is no time left for educational or cultural pursuits. Unfortunately, Pat is grossly uninformed about life on the island before he accepts the teaching job and takes up residence there himself. Pat learns new methods of surviving and battling the elements just to honor his commitment to his students. One survival technique Pat learns too late is the ability to work within a chain of command structure in an organization. Pat's passion for his work, combined with the gross need of the Yamacraw children, bolsters Pat's already healthy impatience with processes or ignorant people who slow progress. At the end of the book, Pat admits to exiting the Yamacraw experience with his self respect intact but wonders if he couldn't have done more for the island children if he had better managed his own personality, conquered his ego and pride, and learned to survive in the school's administrative environment.

Significant Topics

Among Conroy's more important themes in this novel are racism and the accompanying prejudice, religion, education, family, isolation, and maturation. Conroy the character, usually called Pat, embarks upon a two-fold quest. The first is that of achieving his own destiny, one about which he has most definite ideas. The second is the liberation of the black island children, and by extension, of their families, from the white-instituted illiteracy which binds them to their past as surely as the chains of slavery did their forefathers. The prejudice he must fight to reach his goals comes in several different forms. The school superintendent, Dr. Henry Piedmont, represents the white establishment in its purest and most deadly form. While outwardly showing an interest in Conroy and his various projects at the island school, he will not allow challenge to his established administrative procedures. Black education differs from white education, and such differences must not be challenged. Good or bad, the system remains sacrosanct.

More insidious is the prejudice of the blacks themselves. While Pat eventually gains the trust of the children and their families, he remains powerless to correct the self-silencing they exhibit. Theirs is an inheritance of well-versed subservience to the whites.

They have learned not to question or criticize white policy if they want to be left alone to structure their black soci ety as they please. As Conroy states, "The people of the island have changed very little since the Emancipation Proclamation." The children have been taught by one of their own, Mrs. Brown, a black school teacher, that they are ignorant, even retarded. She tells Pat upon first meeting him, "These people don't want to better themselves."

The white couple who "oversee" the island, the Stones, offer the perfect example of stereotypical Southern prejudice. Mr. Stone stands ready to shoot any "niggers" or "long hair liberals" who threaten the island's security.

He exhibits the curious dichotomy of willingness to aid Conroy as a fellow white, but a complete lack of sympathy toward Conroy's attempts to help the island's black inhabitants.

Conroy fills in his background for the reader, stating, "I was getting tired of my own innocence." He tells of teaching in 1968 at the Beaufort High School in 1968 when Martin Luther King was murdered. Several black girls approach him, demanding that Conroy apologize to them for King's death.

Hearing the young blacks asking why whites cannot treat them "right" and "love us like Jesus taught," followed by threats to burn the city, Pat is seized by "the shadow that hovered over me, white guilt." He feels his teaching at the island school, a position which no other white teacher will consider, might serve to relieve him of that shadow.

As the story, and his relationship with the school children, develops, Pat discovers he must lose the selfish side of his mission, that of his expectations.

While he had come to the island to conquer ignorance, seeing himself as a great white educator, ready to lead the children to intellectual victory, his plans must change. Upon arrival at the school, he discovers that in his class of eighteen sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, four cannot recite the alphabet, some can not even count on their fingers, none know what country they live in, who the President of the United States is, or what the name of the ocean is which surrounds their island. Pat must accept that education may be found in places other than books. He begins to share music with the children and makes a game of geography. Eventually the students leave the island with him to participate in their first round of Halloween trick or treating, and ultimately on a bus trip to Washington D.C. While Pat's relationship with the children flourishes, that with the white establishment suffers.

As in much of Southern writing, the theme of religion, and religious hypocrisy, returns again and again to Conroy's novels. This novel is no exception. Conroy deftly shapes the religious hypocrisy of the whites in relation to the more honest spiritual experiences of the blacks. Pat finds himself challenged by the necessity to cope with island superstition. While supremely religious and following the precepts of Christian teaching, the black islanders also believe in ghosts and witch doctors. The author uses this groundless, yet honest, superstition of the blacks to parallel the dishonest religion of the local whites, who forbid blacks to enter their churches. The most highly Christian whites of Beaufort are also the most prejudiced. One white couple, Zeke and Ida Skimberry, who help Pat in his boat trips back and forth to the island, stand apart from the other town inhabitants in their attitudes toward blacks. They had been active members in the local Baptist church until its members voted to close it down if "a nigger ever tried to attend a service."

Zeke and Ida never went back to that church. Yet even this couple, as close to open minded as most of the lifelong Southerners in this novel ever come, retain prejudices. At one point, Ida calls a specialist in Savannah to check her son for his gland problems. She then informs the narrator that she has just done a terrible thing; she believes she

may have made an appointment with her son to see a "nigger doctor"; she suspects his race because of the way his voice sounded over the phone.

Struggling over the proper way to cancel the appointment, she wonders if she could not just call the doctor back, tell him she means no harm, but that "I just feel that a person should go to his own kind." Pat understands her attitude, because he was raised with the same attitudes himself. Conroy's oftused theme of hypocrisy finds expression through the Skimberrys. But as often happens in this novel, the hypocrisy reflects upon Pat's own problems in being honest with himself.

Pat marries part way through the novel, involving his wife and her daughters in his relationships with the children. Barbara Conroy whole-heartedly supports his efforts. His marriage causes Pat to move off the island, where he had been living during the week, returning to Beaufort only on weekends, in order to be with his family full time. Pat and Barbara end up hosting several of the island children in their own home during their freshman year at the high school in Beaufort, a move which angers many of their white neighbors.

At the end of the first school year, the powers-that-be attempt to have Pat fired. Ostensibly due to the cost of paying for Pat's gasoline to power his boat on his island commutes, his dismissal remains the direct result of his having made those who run the school system feel threatened. While he wins an early battle against the system, he eventually loses to the power structure of the local school administration. At first devastated by not being allowed to be with the children any longer, Pat eventually realizes a vital era in his maturation has come to a close. Conroy concludes the novel with a chapter allowing his reflection upon his experience and how he has gained by it.

Style

Perspective

As an autobiography, the book is written in the first person narrative perspective. The person telling the story is the author himself who delivers his views and relates events according to his own perception of them. The author does not supply any insight into the motives, feelings or actions of any other people and can only relate instances about these people from his own point of view. When there are conversations detailed, the author can simply relate what the other person says, and although the author may guess at the other person's thoughts, he cannot be certain he is correct. Because the nature of the book is a nonfiction account of a person's philosophy on different topics, there is little room for any other points of view. This relaying of personal thoughts is punctuated at times by the retelling of events or incidents to add some dimension to the book, and everything is still from the author's own experiences and perspective. While this technique can be viewed as limiting, the author is able to provide much detail on his own thoughts and emotions which would not otherwise be available to the reader. This perspective works well with the nature of the book.

Tone

The tone of the book is very informal and engaging, almost as if the reader is having a one-on-one conversation with the author. The language is informal and casual to define the author's personality and energy. There are a few slang words, but they are in context with the dialogue and appropriate for the work. The narrative is very high energy with a laid back yet intelligent wit portraying the author's own personal style of speaking. The story is told in an unhurried style to mirror the author's pace during his journey. There is also a strong undercurrent of authenticity and sincerity throughout the book, which makes the story believable. The author makes note of the language style of the Yamacraw Island people as the Gullah dialect, prominent among black people in South Carolina. Conroy explains, "Experts have studied this patois for years and they have written several books on the subject. It is a combination of an African dialect and English; some even claim that remnants of Elizabethan English survive among the Gullah people" (Chapter 2, Page 42). The book is also liberally populated with pieces of conversations between the white Southern people whose accents and phrases align perfectly with the stereotypes of people of this region during this period of time.

Structure

The book is divided into 12 chapters which show Pat's progress as he takes the assignment and follows him through his first and then final termination from his teaching position. Some of the chapters have informal breaks when Pat wants to change a thought or steer the reader back into the past without losing the rhythm of the story's

execution. Conroy also inserts some material to break up the long narrative such as lyrics of songs or excerpts of letters written to Dr. Piedmont. Conroy also writes the first and last chapters with a more philosophical tone. The first chapter sets up the need for a good teacher on Yamacraw Island and Pat's journey that prepared him for the position, while the last chapter reveals Pat's sorrow that he was not better equipped to help the children or to harness his own anger and ego to rise above the system that eventually terminated him. The chapters in between these two bookends points are filled with delightful stories of the children's behaviors as well as some of the challenges Pat faces when trying to do his best in an impossible situation.

Quotes

"'Son, you are a godsend.' I sat in the chair rigidly analyzing my new status. 'I have prayed at night,' he continued, 'for an answer to the problems confronting Yamacraw Island. I have worried myself sick. And to think you would walk right into my office and offer to teach those poor colored children on that island. It just goes to show you that God works in mysterious ways.'" Chapter 1, Page 1

"It is not a large island, nor an important one, but it represents an era and a segment of history that is rapidly dying in America. The people of the island have changed very little since the Emancipation Proclamation. Indeed, many of them have never heard of this proclamation." Chapter 1, Page 4

"Those were the years when the word nigger felt good to my tongue, for my mother raised her children to say colored and to bow our heads at the spoken name of Jesus. My mother taught that only white trash used the more explosive, more satisfying epithet to describe black people. Nigger possessed the mystery and lure of forbidden fruit and I overused it in the snickering clusters of white friends who helped my growing up." Chapter 1, Page 7

"But the shadow that hovered over me, white guilt, still had to be reckoned with. So in the days after King's assassination, greatly moved by the death of one I had admired so much, I lobbied for a course in black history in a school 90 percent white." Chapter 1, Page 14

"'I try, Mr. Bennington. You know I try. But these people don't want to better themselves. Why, Mr. Conroy,' she said, turning to me, 'the parents stay likkered up down there at the club and take the children with them when they do it. Satan smiles at all the sinnin' going on at that club.'" Chapter 2, Page 25

"'You've got to treat them stern. Tough, you know. You got the older babies. Grades five through eight. Keep them busy with work all the time or they'll run you right out of that there door,' she said. 'I know colored people better than you do. That's because I am one myself. You have to keep your foot on them all the time. Step on them. Step on them every day and keep steppin' on them when they gets out of line. If you have any trouble, Mama Brown will be right next door. We got lots of trees outside, and every tree gets lots of switches. I got some in that cabinet right over there.'" Chapter 2, Page 27

"They had never heard of Shakespeare or Aesop. They never heard of England or India. They had never been to a movie theater or to a ball game. They had never heard of

democracy, governors or senators, capitals of states, or any oceans, or famous actors, or artists, or newspapers, or kinds of automobiles. They had never been to a museum, never looked at a work of art, never read a piece of good literature, never ridden a city bus, never taken a trip, never seen a hill, never seen a swift stream, never seen a superhighway, never learned to swim, and never done a thousand things that children of a similar age took for granted." Chapter 2, Page 43

"When no one checked out a book in three years, officials were noticeably chagrined. 'Stupid niggers. You bust your ass to help them, and they don't even check out a book.' Good intentions flourish on Yamacraw Island. The projects of concerned white folks are evident everywhere. Supply books and by a miraculous process of osmosis, the oyster-pickers will become Shakespearean scholars. All dem nigras need is books and a little tad of education." Chapter 3, Page 56

"None of these subjects did I touch in depth; I only gave a general explanation of each one and tried to get the kids to look at history as a flow of events that somehow affects every person on earth. We used no books. It was oral history and oral geography. Nothing was written down. We talked and learned by talking and, soon enough for me, our pep rallies had evolved into wild chaotic exchanges of rote memory. I teased and cajoled them and expected them to fire back, to take no crap from me, just as I took no crap from them." Chapter 3, Page 64

"'Look at those long-haired bastards. Can't tell if they're boys or girls. Worse than Germans or Japs. Look at that hippie with the flag sewed to his butt. I'd cut it off his ass with a butcher's knife if I was there. Take half of his ass with it. Lice. All they are is lice. Huntley and Brinkley are lice, too. They aren't supporting our boys in Vietnam. Naw. They're lice. Just like that nigger Martin Luther King. He was a goddamn Communist sure as hell. Ask J. Edgar Hoover. Now there's a man. Finest man in America. He calls a spade a spade. Look at them lice there now. Cute, ain't they? I wouldn't give them a drink of piss if they were dyin' of thirst." Chapter 4, Page 81

"Zeke and Ida mouthed the regional prejudices against blacks constantly, and believed implicitly in almost every stereotype ever concocted against blacks in the South. Yet every black man or woman I brought to their house was invited inside, offered coffee, and treated with dignity and warmth. Later, Ida would tell me, 'That was sure a nice nigger man you brought here this morning. I hope you bring him back again real soon.'" Chapter 4, Page 89

"In the midst of resolving the most traumatic adjustment I had ever made, I found myself struck with a new and foreign emotion that had not appeared in the prescribed blueprint of the year. On September 18, 1969, beknownst only to God, me, and one other person,

I fell in love. On October 10, 1969, the unlikely triumvirate cooperated once again and I married Barbara Bolling Jones." Chapter 4, Page 103

"'Mr. Conroy, do you realize that these boys have no credentials? The state requires all of its teachers to have the proper credentials. What if the man from the state department comes walkin' into this here school, carrying his badge, and askin' to see everybody's credentials? Now what we gonna do with these California boys? Hide 'em in the ladies room? No, Mr. Conroy, we must abide by the rules of the state.' 'Mrs. Brown, all these guys want to do is come in during the day and help us out. Nothing else. It cannot hurt a single thing.' 'It will hurt the reputation and cree-dentials of this school.' 'This ain't Harvard, Mrs. Brown.' 'Rules are rules, Mr. Conroy. The state makes the rules.' 'There are no rules which say these guys cannot come and help us every day.' 'I am the principal.' 'Yes, ma'am.'" Chapter 5, Page 123

"'Cause I know the river. I lose three fam'bly in the river. They drop in the water and sink like rock to the bottom. When they come up, they swell like toadfish. I been libbin' on Yamacraw for seventy plus seven more years and I ain't gonna lose no grands to that river. I is old and see what it can do. Dat river can eat a man. None of my chillum goin' along wit' you.'" Chapter 6, Page 149

"'Now that somebody who wet the wrestlin' mat most prob'ly wet the bed he slept on the night before. Now, mattresses in white folks' homes cost sometimes between fifty and one hunnert dollars. Sometimes one hunnert-fifty dollars and sometimes even two hunnert dollars. You can ruin a mattress by urinatin' on it. All of us know that urine is made out of acid. And you can imagine what acid can do to a two-hunnert-dollar mattress. Eat right through it. Whoever it was has no reason to be ashamed. There are plenty of weak bladders in the world. A bladder's just like a muscle. Some weak. Some strong. Lots of people wets the bed. Whoever that person is, and he knows who it is, should come up to me and say, 'Mrs. Brown, I have a weak bladder and I'm very sorry.' Isn't that right, class?'" Chapter 6, Page 169

"'I sure do like that town over yonder, Mr. Conrack,' said Jasper. 'All you do is rap the door and some man pop his head out to give you the candy.' 'I wouldn't try it every day of the year, Jasper. Especially in that neighborhood you were in.'" Chapter 6, Page 171

"How could I compare or relate my childhood to growing up on Yamacraw? My mother's reading to me each night was a celebration of language and tradition, a world of Mother Goose and lyric poetry, where Bobby Shaftoe goes to sea and intrepid, prepubic heroes stand on burning decks. My youth was a glut of words, a circus of ideas nurtured by parents dedicated to diplomas and the production of professionals from the tribe of children they sired. My youth sang the glory of books, the psalms of travel, of new faces, of the universe of Disney animation, of Popsicle sticks and county fairs, of

parables of war spoken by a flight-jacketed father, of parables of love and Jesus sung by a blue-eyed mother, a renegade Baptist, a converted Catholic, a soldier of the Lord." Chapter 6, Page 173

"Dear Mr. Piedmont, I did not like your letter. Since it is rather inconsequential whether a public school teacher agrees with a dictum passed down from his superintendent or not, my only recourse is to answer you without regard to our positions. First of all, if I was expected to come to Yamacraw Island to preside over the intellectual decimation of forty kids, you selected the wrong boy. If I was expected to remain silent when intolerable conditions presented themselves, then once again, I should not have been sent to the island. Even though these kids were unfortunate enough to be born on Yamacraw Island, it will take you and a team of varsity scholars to convince me they don't deserve the same quality of education received by children in Beaufort itself. If you disagree with this, then I feel it is you who must question your suitability for the job of superintendent for the entire county." Chapter 8, Page 211

"The one goal I developed the first week that never changed was to prepare the kids for the day when they would leave the island for the other side. Their experience in driving oxen, cleaning fish, and catching crabs could not be classified as excellent preparation for the streets of large cities. Anything that I could construe as relevant to the day when they would leave the island had a place in the classroom." Chapter 10, Page 264

"Things I had not noticed for ten years now assumed great significance. I regretted that I could not be making this trip with the freshness of insight and beautiful innocence of Jasper and the others. I regretted that I was old, that I could no longer appreciate the education afforded by an American highway, and that I could not grasp the mystery of a single line painted down a road going north." Chapter 10, Page 277

"'Sure. You get your information from Bennington, who gets his from letter from Mrs. Brown, his hired stool pigeon. Bennington whispers in your ear that I am an impudent punk who's going to make trouble. Bennington is the same guy who was in charge of that island for forty years, Doctor Piedmont. Forty stinking years he was the king of the dump. And he didn't do crap, but let those kids rot over there.'" Chapter 11, Page 286

"'This is all beside the point. You were late to school. You didn't work with the chain of command. You commuted against my orders. And you charged the gas to the county. We can't afford to pay for your personal transportation to and from school. That's not fair to the other teachers. What if they ask me about my payin' your gas bill to school? How could I look them in the eye?' 'I drive thirty miles to Bluffton, Doctor Piedmont. I pay for my gas until I hit water. Since I can't walk on water, and since I can't swim twenty miles, and since I teach on an island, I don't think it extraordinary that the county pay for my transportation. Especially since I had a meeting with Mr. Bennington and Mr. Sedgwick to discuss the gas bill and they authorized it.'" Chapter 11, Page 287

"'And so we are here. I want to go back to Yamacraw next year. I cannot go if I have to assume transportation costs for the boat. The superintendent told me I was exactly like any other teacher in the county. That is nonsense. When I taught at Beaufort High School, I did not have to chop wood for the stove, haul seven hundred pounds of groceries, walk two miles to school, wash dishes during lunchtime, spoon food onto plates to help the cook, drive cows and pigs out of the schoolyard at recess time, send my students to the woods if the toilet broke, or fix soup when the cook was sick. Because of difficulties with the boat, I sometimes did not make it to school. But in the framework of an entire year, look around the county, talk to all of your teachers. Show me a better investment that produced more significant human results—and I will quit.'" Chapter 11, Page 294

"I saw the necessity of living and accepting bullcrap in my midst. It was everywhere. In teachers' manuals, in the platitudes muttered by educators, in school boards, in the community, and most significantly, in myself. I could be so self-righteous, so inflexible when I thought that I was right or that the children had been wronged. I lacked diplomacy and would not compromise. To survive in the future I would have to learn the complex art of ass-kissing, that honorable American custom that makes the world go 'round. Survival is the most important thing. As a bona fid ass-kisser, I might lose a measure of self-respect, but I could be teaching and helping kids. As it is, I have enough self-respect to fertilize Yankee Stadium, but I am not doing a thing for anybody. I could probably still be with the Yamacraw kids had I conquered my ego." Chapter 12, Page 319

Adaptations

The Water Is Wide was renamed Conrack when filmed for the big screen; Jon Voight starred in the leading role, supported by Hume Cronin, Paul Winfield, and Madge Sinclair. Filmed in 1974, it exists on video, but those interested in it may have to place a special order to procure it.

Key Questions

Due to its reflection of social attitudes tied to a particular time frame in American history, this novel allows an opportunity for comparison and contrast of its social mores with those of a more contemporary time. Almost all readers will admit to some type of prejudice, allowing them to identify with the "trouble makers" of this novel. Concurrently, mos't will identify with Conroy's idealism in trying to counter age-old ideas. The frustrations he encounters may be experienced vicariously by readers, allowing discussion of how they might have handled his situation.

Discussion groups might focus upon the idea of morals as dictated by religion and also as dictated by society, evaluating differences and similarities.

Comparisons of stereotypes in the South to those in other regions of the country, and in other types of regional fiction, will prove stimulating.

1. What exactly is Pat Conroy's mission? Do you feel that he succeeded or failed, and why?

2. How does the narrator's background relate to the novel? How typical of a Southerner of the late 1960s and early 1970s are his feelings?

3. Which of the villainous characters, Piedmont, Bennington, or Ted Strong, might be more likely to change his prejudiced views over time?

4. What is the importance of the adult female characters, other than Mrs. Brown?

5. How does Conroy's age affec t his views? Had he been middle-aged, how might he have handled the situation differently?

6. Choose what you believe to be the most effective classroom scene for the reader, and tell why.

7. What aspects of the islanders qualify them to be regarded with suspicion by inhabitants of the mainland?

Is this suspicion merited?

8. Who benefits the most from Conroy's time at the island, himself or the children? Support your answer with scene from the book.

9. Are there any rounded characters, that is characters who experience a lifechanging realization or an epiphany, other than Conroy? Pinpoint the scenes in which characters exhibit such changes in attitude.

10. What accounts for the exotic air of the island?

Topics for Discussion

At the beginning of the book, Dr. Piedmont tells Pat that Pat is a godsend and an answer to many prayers, yet Dr. Piedmont does not always treat people with the Christian behavior he professes. Discuss the behavior of Dr. Piedmont and others like him and how they believe they are living their religion.

Would you have taken the job of teaching on Yamacraw Island? Explain why or why not.

Pat feels that he failed because he could not fit in with the people in charge of the schools, but he suppresses his feelings many times in the story to get what he needs. Discuss Pat's behavior and how he chooses when to fight and when to keep quiet.

Discuss what would happen to a teacher like Mrs. Brown if she were to step into a school system in 2008.

What do you think Pat's students would say about him if you asked them today about their experiences in his classroom?

Do you think Pat's relative inexperience had anything to do with the upsetting outcome of his Yamacraw experience? What do you think Pat could or should have done differently to exact a different outcome?

Pat is a product of his environment just as the children of Yamacraw are the products of theirs. Discuss situations where these differences worked and where they clashed.

Literary Precedents

Conroy's novel fits firmly within the Southern writing tradition. It varies in the aspect of its realism, presented within the romance which is the South.

Conroy demythologizes the South by adequately portraying the source of its self-dissatisfaction.

He employs the technique of using characters to represent various aspects of Southern attitudes, similar to the technique employed by other contemporary Southern fiction writers, such as Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty.

However, the reader may not be quite as charmed with Conroy's characters, knowing that they and the story remain, for the most part, factual.

Related Titles

In one sense, all of Conroy's works are related by place (coastal South Carolina), by dysfunctional families, and by their autobiographical elements.

The canon of Conroy's work reveals a family chronicle; the names of the characters may change from book to book, but the evolving psychological portraits taken as a whole portray Conroy's principal theme of the relationship of the alienated individual to family and society.

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