

“The Beginning of My Father’s Choir”

Written by Margaret Evans
Tuesday, 23 June 2020 13:15



An excerpt from a novel in progress by David Kiser

In March of this year, David Kiser of Anderson, South Carolina, was selected as the first recipient of a Pat Conroy Literary Center Writers Residency. David stayed for 10 days at the Marshsong Cottage of residency benefactor Mary Ellen Thompson, during which time he made great progress on his first novel and his nonfiction history of music in the Palmetto State. David is an adjunct professor of piano at Anderson University and host of “On the Keys” on South Carolina Public Radio. An excerpt from his novel-in-progress is reprinted here with the author’s permission. □

A second Conroy Center writers residency opportunity will be announced later this summer, conjoined to the fifth annual Pat Conroy Literary Festival to be held this November 5–8. □

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Before Pastor Kim left us, choir practice was held regularly in the hotel parlor. It was the only space in town that had a piano. It was the only space in town that had a lot of things, like a radio, a large fireplace, comfortable cushions, drapes on the windows, placemats, fine china, vases with spring cuttings, and a bar with an assortment of imported drink. It was nearly a café.

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My father did not know how to play the piano by sight, but he knew how to play by ear and he was a good host. Sometimes I think the men joined the choir—for there were only men—because my father would open the hotel bar as a reward for good singing and the men would leave with the Song of David on their whiskey moistened lips and the spring would cease to be so quiet. Pastor Kim did not know about the drinking and he went to his death thinking the choir was as holy as the words they sang, but anyone who has sung in a choir knows that drinking is the preferred pastime and is sometimes elevated to sport.

At first my father followed the lining out style, but that proved to be too cumbersome when long rests punctuated the psalms between phrases as the group tried to collectively remember what happened next. So then my father asked Pastor Kim if he had any singing books and Pastor Kim dug around until he found one that seemed to be from the previous century. My father read the antiquated introduction and then he made me read it so that the two of us were now educated in the art of shape notes and were able to equate the notes on the page with the dizzying arrangement of black and white piano keys. We studied it together when there were no guests at the hotel. And we became close. We never talked to each other directly, but always through the song book and I learned though my father was not an educated man he was whip smart and was able to cut through all manner of idiom and technicalities and bring his magnificent hand down on the piano and turn the word into music. So we became the singing masters.

Father had me arrange the chairs in the parlor in a hollow square. He kept time at the center, raising his fist up and down like a woodsman, while his partitioned flock sang the shapes, moving their own hands, while I maintained pitch at the piano, which was up against the front wall. I had my back to the men, but sometimes I peeked around to see my father and I was filled with pride. The music swept us up into its rhythm and when the tones agreed with each other after some serious, slow singing of fa so la mi, the room began to dance and vibrate. Then we added the holy words and the spirit took us. Then when we added drink during the ten-minute water break—for whiskey was *mistaken* for water and there was nothing to do about it then but to drink it—our voices sailed out of the windows and nature heard our joyous proclamation and the silence was beaten back. When there were hotel guests sometimes they sat among us and all was good.

After the first month of singing together, sometimes my father would sit down and point at another member to lead from the center and when he did this the choir paid very close attention as to help the newcomer. Eventually we had all taken a turn at the center and when it was my turn I was very scared, but my father smiled at me and said it would be all right. I took the center and I felt all the eyes on me and I felt exposed like Eve, but still I led and a change came over me and I did not know if it was good. I felt the power that comes in leading a group of people in a spiritual activity. The tenors sang the tune in front of me, square on and noble and boastful

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and then to their right the trebles with their surprisingly high, womanly voices, made the music soar and to my right came the low, rumbling foundations of the bass and behind me the hidden altos added their faithful counterpoint. I was surrounded and the music was like baptism. Some choirs can go on like this for years, but others, like ours, are made for ending and silence and repose and the combination of song and drink made us maudlin.

Above: Novelist David Kiser with Mary Ellen Thompson, Cassandra King Conroy and Kathy Harvey, all of the Pat Conroy Literary Center