

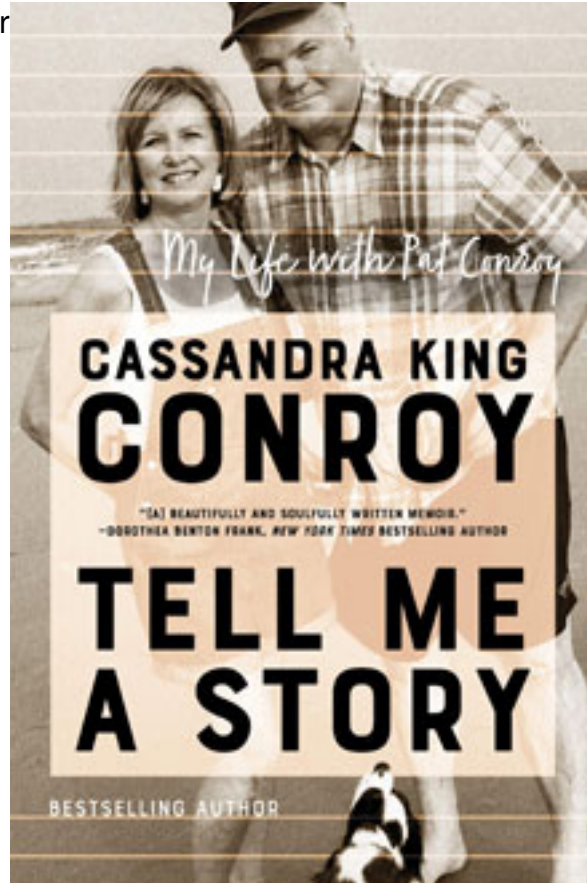
Telling Her Story

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 15 October 2019 13:51 - Last Updated Wednesday, 16 October 2019 05:45



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Cassandra King Conroy is curled up in an armchair, buried in a pile of family photos, when she waves me through the front door.

“Margaret, if it’d been anybody but you coming over, I might’ve cleaned up this mess,” she laughs, and I’m instantly at home.

It’s been a while. In recent years, I’ve attended a few Conroy Center parties in this cozy living room, but if memory serves, the last time I sat on this sofa visiting with Cassandra, her husband was in the other chair. Beyond the glass doors, Pat Conroy’s beloved Battery Creek is primed for sunset like a canvas for paint, and I feel his absence in my throat.

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The old photographs are scattered everywhere – coffee table, kitchen counter, Cassandra’s lap, the floor. She’s been organizing them, scanning them, writing captions. She’s under the gun, needs to finish by October 29th, the day she launches her new memoir. In *Tell Me A Story: My Life with Pat Conroy*, she ended up telling so many stories there was no room left for pictures, so she’s providing a web address that will take readers to an online photo gallery.

“How painful was it to write this book?” I wonder aloud, having just cried *and* laughed my way through the Advance Reader Copy.

“At first, it wasn’t painful at all,” she tells me, “because I started writing it as a cookbook – a kind of food memoir – when Pat was still alive. So it was fun! When Pat died, I put it aside for a good while. But eventually, I needed to get back to my writing. As anybody who’s ever lost a spouse will tell you – after all the guests and family have gone, and all the hoopla is over, there comes this point . . . and you’re alone. And this is your life now. The house felt so empty, especially with somebody like Pat, who was such a big presence . . .”

So Cassandra returned to the food memoir – she was now thinking of calling it *Supper for One: A Widow’s Scrapbook* – but something didn’t feel right. It wasn’t fun anymore. Eventually, her editor decided she should drop the food and keep the memoir. There were two separate books here. *Supper for One* was pushed to the backburner and *Tell Me a Story* was born.

In these pages, we meet a Pat Conroy none of us knew – not his readers, not even those of us who *did* know him in “real life.” The Conroy we encounter here is tentative, tender, vulnerable... even romantic. He is somebody’s boyfriend. Somebody’s sweetheart. He gives thoughtful gifts and writes mushy love notes.

He is also bull-headed, conflicted, and outrageously funny – more like the Conroy we *do* know.

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Oh, and he's absent-minded. So very, very absent-minded. Cassandra writes hilariously of sticky note reminders left all over the house, carefully pressed funeral suits left unworn in the trunk, lovingly created hostess gifts left un-given. It's a portrait of a brilliant man who paid scrupulous attention to every detail of the natural world – not to mention the landscape of the human heart – but regularly walked out the door wearing his shirt inside out.

Most of all, *Tell Me a Story* is a portrait of a true, enduring love affair – between two very different people who complemented each other, balanced each other, and maybe even saved each other. She, the up-and-coming novelist just hitting her stride. He, the long-established prince of Southern letters. It's almost a literary *Star is Born*

– without the fading career (Pat was still a bestseller when he died), the professional rivalry, or the self-destruction. On the contrary, Cassandra brought stability, peace and wellbeing into Pat's chaotic existence, while he gave her the moral support and artistic encouragement she'd never had in her former life as the wife of a preacher.

He also gave her a writing room of her own. "It remains the best thing anyone has ever given me," she says.

When they married and she moved into his house on Fripp Island, she was hesitant to claim her own space there. Pat was insistent, and she finally gave in, but only because he threatened to rent her an office in town if she didn't. A thrifty "ant" to Pat's extravagant "grasshopper," Cassandra says her aversion to unnecessary spending finally trumped her fear of being seen as the "wicked stepmother who took over everything."

"I took the room upstairs," she writes. "After years without a space of my own, I felt guilty about claiming such a grand one – a feeling that lasted a whole minute at most. Other, less noble feelings took over. I had to admit that Pat had been right, absolutely unequivocally right on. Naturally he gloated when I told him so. I *adored* having my own space. I reveled in it. I enjoyed every minute I spent there, every butt-numbing hour that I perched on the daybed with my laptop on a wicker tea tray I'd found at the Salvation Army store. After I got everything set up to suit me, I wrote feverishly and for hours on end, as though I could make up for the lost years I'd spent denying myself."

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Cassandra covers a lot of ground in *Tell Me A Story*. She takes us from the couple's first meeting – at a literary soiree – through their long friendship-turned-courtship, through their 19-year marriage that ended in 2016 with Pat's death from pancreatic cancer. But the big story hangs on lots of little stories – some funny, some bittersweet, some fairly devastating. Not only do we meet a Pat Conroy we never knew, we meet a Cassandra King Conroy ("King-Ray" to Pat) whose sensitivity and dark humor rival her famous husband's. Theirs was a rare and enviable marriage of true minds, and Cassandra does it justice with her compelling prose.

Through the heavy chapters and the light, it's a pleasure to keep company with these two intriguing people who cracked each other up, *held* each other up, delighted in each other, and made a sanctuary of their love.

After three-plus years, Cassandra still has a hard time believing Pat's gone. "I dream about him a lot," she says. "Especially while I was writing this book. I kept dreaming that I was searching for him, but I couldn't find him. It's like I knew he was there, but he was someplace just out of reach."

With *Tell Me A Story*, Cassandra has brought Pat Conroy back to bold, beautiful life – not just for herself, but for all of us. It's a dream come true.

*The book launch for **Tell Me A Story: My Life with Pat Conroy** will take place Tuesday, October 29 at USCB Center for the Arts, from 7 – 8:30 pm. Cassandra King Conroy will be on stage in conversation with David Lauderdale, with a book signing to follow. The public is invited to this FREE kick-off event for the [2019 Pat Conroy Literary Festival](#).*

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