Sanctuary found amid pages of lifetime of books

By Glenn C. Altschuler

Globe Correspondent / November 21, 2010

The Old New York Book Shop was for decades a landmark in Atlanta. For aspiring novelist Pat Conroy the store was a sanctuary: "to refresh, replete, and sustain me, and sometimes, if I were lucky and alert, to knock my damn socks off." And a cathedral where he "stole the dream of fire from the pillar of God."

Once the home of 30,000 volumes, the store is empty now, Conroy reports, "a husk, a discarded snakeskin, an empty conch shell as mute as the sea."

Conroy doesn't say that the book, like the bookstore, is an endangered species. But that possibility in the current digital age makes "My Reading Life," his moving memoir of a passion that saved the sanity (and perhaps the life) of an abused child, timely as well as timeless.

Elegant, evocative, and elegiac, "My Reading Life" is an homage to Conroy's mother. A college dropout, the mother of seven, and the wife of an alcoholic Marine fighter pilot, Peg Conroy used reading "as a text of liberation, a way out of the sourceless labyrinth that devoured poor Southern girls like herself." She cherished Welty and Wharton, "knew her way around" Fitzgerald and Hemingway, and turned Pat into "an insatiable, fanatical reader," who devoured 200 pages a day. She "could not give me herself," Conroy confesses, "but she gave me literature as a replacement."

Gene Norris, Conroy's English teacher at Beaufort High School in South Carolina, was almost as influential. In many ways a traditional Southern gentleman, Norris had the courage to assign "The Catcher in the Rye" — and defend his choice to a skeptical school board. Salinger's portrait of Holden Caulfield, he declared, "was the most authentic rendition of a modern-day teenager in American fiction." Eager to attach his "moon of solitude" to a "good man's gravitational pull," Conroy found in Norris a surrogate father — and talked to him every single day, no matter where he found himself. When Norris went into the hospital for chemotherapy, Conroy offered to quit writing and care for him.

Conroy is an old-fashioned reader — and writer. Unlike many "modern writers," who "abjure the power of stories in their work, banish them to the suburbs of literature, [and] drive them out toward the lower pastures of the lesser moons," he revels in the title of storyteller.

Literature "can do many things," Conroy claims; "sometimes it can even do the most important things." Reading Thomas Wolfe's "Look Homeward, Angel," a Christmas present from Norris in 1961, was one of the pivotal events of his life. Conroy acknowledges, but could care less about, the flaws that have made Wolfe an object of critical derision — "windiness and the groping, hair-pulling abstractions."

Mesmerized by the narrator's distinctive voice and sentences "as pretty as blue herons," he read the novel three times. Wolfe, he writes, had the courage to retain "the howlings and incoherence and bawlings . . . that rise up in nightmare." And "Look Homeward, Angel" touched him "in all the broken places." The love Wolfe exhibited for his "maddening and outrageous father," he reveals, "opened the door of conversation" in his family and led to the memorable portrait of Donald Conroy in "The Great Santini."

Concerned that Pat's prose might become a "floodplain for dizzying emanations from the snowy high slopes of a natural-born Wolfean," Norris gave his perennial pupil a second gift, "The Sun Also Rises." To Conroy, however, Hemingway's spare sentences and understated emotions were "trays of ice." And, "My Reading Life" suggests, he has remained addicted to long novels painted on large canvases that strive to make us better people. Shrugging off the racist depiction of the Confederacy as paradise in "Gone With The Wind," Conroy heaps praise on Margaret Mitchell for creating Rhett Butler, the black-hearted, impudent, funny opportunist, and for placing an "elegiac sense of dissolution on the white shoulders of the most irresistible, spiderious, seditious and wonderful of American heroines, Scarlett O'Hara."

But make no mistake: Conroy's taste in books is, indeed, eclectic and inexhaustible. His list of recommended books includes "The Golden Bowl" by Henry James; "Deliverance" by James Dickey; "A Dance to the Music of Time" by
Anthony Powell; “The Land of Laughs” by Jonathan Carroll; and “Invisible Cities” by Italo Calvino. And the poetry of Jonathan Williams. Sometimes, he acknowledges, a good book ratifies a reader’s despair about the world; sometimes it lays down a safety net; and, at best, it supplies “a terrible brightness that wards off the ineffable approach of death.”

Conroy can never escape a delightful and daunting thought: More and more books “are jumping up and down with their hands raised,” demanding his attention. If you don’t envy him, you ought to.

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