'The Death of Santini' review: Pat Conroy writes about his family one more time

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER/Special to The Oregonian

At age 65, almost 40 years after he wrote his novel "The Great Santini," Pat Conroy still carries "the bruised freight" of his childhood every day. Taking pride in having written more about his father, a volatile Marine aviator; his mother, a product of "the poor and lowborn South;" and his six siblings "than any other writer in American history," he feels compelled, with "The Death of Santini," a work of nonfiction, to try, "one last time," to make sense of -- and make his peace with -- a house of pain that often made him wish he had never been born.

Conroy should have quit while he was ahead. Designed in part to demonstrate that behind every happy family is a crazy one, his memoir veers from anger to sentimentality, adds little to what we already know about Don and Peg Conroy and their damaged children, and seems, in the end, a wish seeking to give birth to a fact.

"The Death of Santini: The Story of a Father and His Son" has its moments. Although the portrait of him is anything but flattering, Don Conroy is delighted when "The Great Santini" becomes a film and Robert Duvall is cast as Santini. "A young Humphrey Bogart to play me," he declares, "a nobody to play you. Isn't it ironic, son?" And Georgia-born Peg Conroy earns our respect when she tells Pat and Carol Ann, his sister, stories about Anne Frank and declares her determination "to raise a family that will hide Jews."

Too often, however, the memoir is filled with expressions of hatred, sobbing, mental breakdowns, and sophomoric banter that numb more than they illuminate. Conroy wanted to vomit, he tells us, each time his father knocked on the door in the morning. While he believes his mother became angrier and more treacherous after she had cancer, his brothers and sisters, he writes, remain convinced that she was "vain, cheap and had grown bone-tired with the exhaustion of motherhood."

Most important, Conroy does not provide a credible explanation for his pivot to the conviction "that he was born with a need" to love his dad, that Don Conroy, always loving and loyal, "was just not put together like other men," and
that his parents were "amazing, my portals into the light." Hasn't he insisted that Colonel Conroy verbally and physically abused his wife and children and indicated he had had to lie to make him human in the novel?

You can't blame Pat Conroy for wanting to declare an end to his war with Santini. You are left to wonder, however, whether with this "dive into the caves of the coral reef where the morays wait in ambush" he has really gotten to the bottom of things.

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