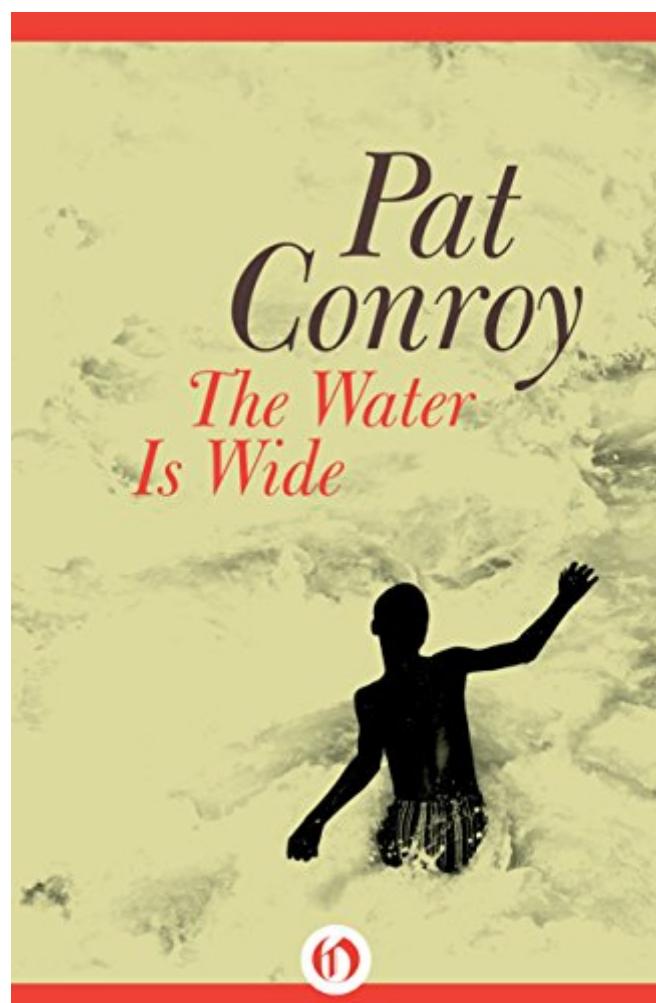


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The Water Is Wide



Synopsis

Pat Conroy's bestselling memoir recalls his dramatic experience teaching impoverished black students in South Carolina. Though the children of Yamacraw Island live less than two miles from the southern mainland, they can't name the US president or the ocean that surrounds them. Most can't read or write. Many of the students are the descendants of slaves, handicapped by poverty and isolation. When Pat Conroy arrives, an eager young teacher at the height of the civil rights movement, he finds a community still bound by the bitter effects of racism, but he is determined to broaden its members' horizons and give them a voice. In this poignant memoir, which Newsweek called "Miraculous . . . An experience of joy," the New York Times bestselling author of *The Prince of Tides* plumbs his experiences as a young teacher on an isolated South Carolina island to reveal the shocking inequalities of the American education system.

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Customer Reviews

Pat Conroy's teaching experience on an impoverished South Carolina island in 1969 is reminiscent of Eliot Wigginton's situation in Rabun County, Georgia, during the same time period. (Read Wigginton's book, *Sometimes a Shining Moment: A Foxfire Experience*, if you can locate it.) In

each instance, a well-meaning and hopeful young teacher was dropped into what seemed to be an almost impossible educational situation -- an isolated community with seemingly backward students, nonexistent funds for decent materials, and goals and textbooks that didn't come close to meeting students' needs. In Conroy's case, the added strains of regional racism and administrative power games were too much to overcome, and he had to leave after serving a little more than a year there. And yet, *The Water is Wide* is a humorous book. We laugh at the white teacher's ignorance of the Gullah children's lifestyles, and we laugh at the children's reactions to the facts he tries to teach them. It's one "fish out of water" gag after another, so to speak. We applaud Conroy's dismissal of the educational chain of command and we cross our fingers that field trips to the mainland will come off without a hitch. We hope that the students will be better off than they ever were before his arrival; for this commentary on one year at one small elementary school stands for all the rest of us, across time, at all the other schools in the nation. The most disturbing fact here is that those of us working in public education today can easily recognize practices that we still have to deal with: superintendents as dictators; ineffective or intimidating school boards; administrators who rule from afar and never set foot in any classroom.

In Pat Conroy's first book, *The Water is Wide*, he writes of a universal theme: young idealistic man sets out to change the world and runs into a brick wall. But while this story has been told by other writers, nobody writes with the passion and emotion of Conroy. *The Water is Wide* is based on Conroy's experiences of teaching on Daufuskie Island in the late 1960's (thinly disguised as Wamacraw Island in the book). After his application was turned down for the Peace Corps, Conroy applied for a job teaching black children on this isolated sea island off the South Carolina coast. His 18 charges were from the upper elementary grades. What he discovered was an unbelievable shock. These 18 students did not know what country they lived in, the name of their president, or what ocean lapped their beach. Some couldn't read or write, recognize the alphabet, write their names or count to ten. Also, none of these children who lived surrounded by water could swim. Everything Conroy had learned about teaching was obsolete on Daufuskie, and he had to be flexible in his methodology in teaching his students to learn. Unfortunately, he hits one roadblock after another from supervisors, the superintendent, the school board, his only colleague and even the parents (who liked what Conroy was doing, but didn't want their children leaving the island for trips). He also runs into hypocrisy, inertia, prejudice, and jealousy. While Conroy is trying to teach his students, they are giving him an education as well.

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