

# OUR PRINCE *of* SCRIBES

Writers Remember Pat Conroy



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"What could be better than so many voices coming together to celebrate Pat Conroy? This book is a testament to the enormous hold he had on our hearts and minds."—ANN PATCHETT

## The Ring of Friendship

Lynn Seldon

My name is Lynn Seldon, and I wear *the* ring. It's not one of those diminutive rings from the Citadel. It's a substantial chunk of gold from the Virginia Military Institute (VMI).

I always loved comparing rings—and military school stories and nightmares—with Pat. We shared a love/hate relationship with our chosen colleges—especially our “initiation” rites as Citadel knobs and VMI rats—but wore our rings with pride as part of a unique brotherhood.

I stand proudly in an overflowing platoon of people who were influenced by Pat's words on paper and in person. We first met in the fall of 2009, the year *South of Broad* was released. Fittingly enough, it was in Charleston, just north of Broad.

I'm a long-time travel journalist, and a close friend of mine in the tourism industry had called to say she thought she could coordinate a brief meeting with Pat when he was in town for a book signing at Blue Bicycle Books—a store he loved and where I'd eventually have my own signing. My friend arranged a call with Pat's wonderful wife, Sandra, who said he was free for a few minutes the next morning. I countered with an offer to let a VMI grad buy a Citadel grad some lunch.

After calling Dick Elliott—the (now former) owner of Slightly North of Broad—to see if we could reserve a table at the back of his beloved restaurant, I met Pat in the lobby of the Mills House for the short walk down Queen Street and up Broad to SNOB. During our stroll, Pat quizzed me about VMI, my life as a travel journalist, and my knowledge of Charleston. We stopped several times along the way to admire the architecture, including the renovated Dock Street Theatre, where he waxed poetically—of course—about his Holy City.

Sandra had told me that Pat had an hour or so for lunch, but that lunch—and subsequent pot of coffee back at the hotel—lasted the entire afternoon. Little did I know of the many meals and other confabs to come during the next all-too-short six-plus years.

I'd planned to “interview” Pat with pithy questions about what he'd order for his last meal (incredibly, he paired each dish with a specific wine), but the lunch turned into more of a conversation between seemingly long-time friends who had once served in the trenches of a military school. Pat ordered Frank Lee's famed shrimp and grits and, as he would do with me many times over many meals, he happily shared his food.

As the restaurant emptied, Chef Lee came over to the table to introduce himself to Pat, as did Dick Elliott. It was the first time I'd seen Pat interact with “fans” and I've never forgotten his ability to completely engage with another person visually and verbally—from his piercing Citadel blue eyes to his oh-so-southern drawl.

Sometime during lunch, Pat wondered out loud why no one had written “The VMI Novel,” as he had done for the Citadel with *The Lords of Discipline*. I’ll never forget him looking me squarely in the eyes and saying, “I think you can do it, Lynn.”

After lunch (I still have my scrawled and sauce-stained notes.), we retraced our steps to the bar of the Mills House. Pat asked if I wanted to continue our chat over coffee. Duh.

We talked about life, writing, travel, and, specifically, his love of Charleston, Beaufort, and the lowcountry. He even brought up the VMI novel again before we finally parted and I made my way up Meeting Street in a daze.

The next time I saw Pat, it was in the pretty Shenandoah Valley town of Lexington, Virginia, where he was scheduled to speak at VMI. Pat came north with his friend and Citadel classmate, the novelist John Warley. (I loved *A Southern Girl* and now call John a friend as well.) We met for dinner at the classic Southern Inn on South Main Street, along with their friend, Wyatt Durette (VMI Class of 1961). Pat and I both ordered shad roe, which was in season.

The next morning, we headed up the hill to VMI and Pat, as always, gave a great speech that was totally unrehearsed. Somehow, I’d ended up sitting next to VMI’s superintendent, Gen. Binford Peay, VMI Class of 1962.

Pat began by saying he was wearing the “real” military school ring, holding his hand aloft, but he’d actually forgotten his Citadel ring and had borrowed John’s just before his speech. After the laughter died down, Pat then pointed up to me and said, “There’s a VMI graduate named Lynn Seldon that I’m trying to get to write a novel about VMI. I am as excited about that publication as I can be.”

I can’t remember much more of what he said that morning. I was too focused on him making my work on the novel so public. But, between paying freelance assignments, lots of travel, and some monk-like stays back at VMI’s Moody Hall, where alumni can stay for free, the book Pat referenced eventually saw the light of day about five years later.

One of those paying gigs assignments was a feature about Pat and Sandra for *Writer’s Digest*. For the interview, Pat graciously invited my wife, Cele, and I down to their Fripp Island home. Of course, they gave us a great interview that would eventually become a cover story. But, the thing I remember most will always be heading back to their bedroom and adjacent library and writing room.

To say that Pat collected books is a vast understatement. As outlined in *My Reading Life*, his lifelong love affair with books had led to a vast collection. The books would eventually be moved to their Beaufort home on bucolic Battery Creek, where I would spend many more memorable moments with Pat and Sandra.

During one of our subsequent phone calls, Pat told me about his somewhat regular Thursday lunches with friends at Griffin Market in downtown Beaufort. He said, “You should come.”

I'll never forget those lingering lunches with Pat and "the boys." He was typically joined by Citadel classmates John Warley and Scott Graber, best friend (and wonderful writer in his own right) Bernie Schein, artist Jonathan Hannah (now Bernie's son-in-law), Aaron Schein (Bernie's brother), and occasional others. The concept of the University of South Carolina Press's Story River Books was even hatched when USC Press director extraordinaire Jonathan Haupt came for lunch.

During these lunches, tours of town with Pat (from the Great Santini's grave to the house where they filmed *The Prince of Tides*), and time back at Pat and Sandra's house, Pat never failed to ask about progress on my novel. Despite my plodding he was always encouraging.

In 2013, four years after we'd first met in Charleston. I placed a printout of what I thought was the completed manuscript on Pat's writing desk, ominously atop what appeared to be a first edition of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. The then-title of my short novel was *Of Rats & Rings*, at which Pat laughed his unique laugh, saying, "Rat Seldon, never name a novel after a rodent!" I quickly countered with Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, but Pat would have none of it—and, he was right, of course.

Just a few days later, I received a call from Pat, which caller ID relayed was "Donald Conroy" and I briefly thought the Great Santini himself was somehow on the other end of the line. Paraphrasing what James Dickey had once told him, Pat started the phone call with, "I read your book, bubba. Now the real work begins." He then proceeded to succinctly outline the problems with my plot and how I might fix them. He also gave me the right title: *Virginia's Ring*.

It took another year and the real work—and bloodletting—that Pat suggested, but *Virginia's Ring* was released in 2014. The compelling cover art was completed by Pat's longtime cover artist, Wendell Minor. Pat graciously referred me to him, and Wendell (which, ironically, is also my given name) was kind enough to give me the "Pat Conroy rabbinical discount" for his wonderful work and time. Pat also graciously provided a short cover blurb ("A triumph and a tour de force.") and a longer plug inside, which has surely led to more sales of *Virginia's Ring* than my mere words.

*Virginia's Ring* is simply a physical reminder of Pat's influence on my writing and life. It's the memories I'll cherish more. The meals. The calls. The time with Pat and Sandra in Beaufort and beyond. I stand at attention in that overflowing platoon and salute Pat and everything he did for so many. After all, we wear the ring.

VMI graduate Lynn Seldon ([www.seldonink.com](http://www.seldonink.com)) is a longtime travel journalist. He has written more than a thousand magazine features and has published six books on travel. His first novel was *Virginia's Ring* and his second novel, *Carolina's Ring*, will be published in 2018.