

The New York Times |

BOOKS

Frank Conroy Dies at 69; Led Noted Writers' Workshop

By CHARLES MCGRATH APRIL 7, 2005

Frank Conroy, the author of the classic memoir "Stop-Time" and an influence on generations of young writers, died yesterday at his home in Iowa City. He was 69.

The cause was colon cancer, said his wife, Margaret.

Mr. Conroy, who headed the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa for 18 years, published just five books, a relatively small number for a writer of his reputation. But one of them was the lucid and evocative 1967 memoir that has been a model for countless young writers -- the sort of book that is passed along like a trade secret.

But Mr. Conroy was a personal model as well, a sympathetic but exacting teacher who at Iowa helped shape the early careers of writers including Curtis Sittenfeld, Elizabeth McCracken, Z.Z. Packer, Nathan Englander and Abraham Verghese. Several of Mr. Conroy's former students have themselves become teachers in the Conroy mode. "It's a ripple effect," said one of them, the novelist Jayne Anne Phillips.

Frank Conroy was born in New York City on Jan. 15, 1936. His father, Philip, left his wife and two children when Mr. Conroy was a child and moved in and out of

mental institutions. Mr. Conroy grew up with his mother, Helga, a Danish immigrant, and a stepfather, Guy Trudeau, who was self-absorbed and full of impractical schemes. Bouncing back and forth from Florida to New York, the family at times lived from hand to mouth, and Mr. Conroy's fraught and uncertain childhood and adolescence is the subject of "Stop-Time." The book is a coming-of-age story about a young man who, in a sense, brings himself up.

Mr. Conroy attended Stuyvesant High School in New York City and graduated in 1958 from Haverford College, where he sold his first short story as a senior. After moving to New York, he became a hanger-on at Elaine's, the literary watering hole, where, as the writer David Halberstam recalled, he at first annoyed some of the regulars, who "wondered who this brash young kid was."

"But then 'Stop-Time' came out," Mr. Halberstam said, "and we all shut up." Though it sold only modestly at first, "Stop-Time," one of the rare books to have been blurbed by both Norman Mailer and William Styron, made its author a literary celebrity.

But 18 years elapsed between the publication of "Stop-Time" and Mr. Conroy's next book, "Midair," a short-story collection. "People thought I knew what I was doing when I wrote 'Stop-Time,' but I didn't," Mr. Conroy said last year. "I knew I was a very good writer, but it had all been an act of faith."

He supported himself by writing magazine articles and by playing piano in jazz clubs. After the breakup of his first marriage, to Patty Ferguson, he moved to Nantucket, where he continued to play piano in various night spots and also worked as a scallop fisherman. Mr. Conroy is survived by two sons from that marriage, Daniel Hand, of Ashland, Mass., and Will Christian, of Tucson, Ariz. He is also survived by his first and second wives; another son, Timothy Peabody, of Iowa City; a sister, Ellen Conroy Kennedy, of Columbia Md.; a half-sister, India Trudeau, of Nantucket; an aunt, Hanne Skov, of New York City; and four grandchildren.

Even after moving back to the mainland, Mr. Conroy continued to spend his summers in Nantucket, which is the subject of his last book, "Time and Tide: A Walk Through Nantucket" (2004), and he became a well-known local character there, famous for, among other things, his weekly softball game, known as Third World

Softball.

Mr. Conroy's teaching career began more or less by accident in 1978, when he was invited to the University of Iowa as a last-minute replacement. He found he had a knack for it and went on to teaching jobs at George Mason University, Brandeis and M.I.T., before becoming director of the literature program at the National Endowment for the Arts, a post he held from 1982 to 1987.

In 1987 Mr. Conroy was handpicked by James O. Freedman, then the president of the University of Iowa, to succeed Jack Leggett as director of the Writers' Workshop there. "I told the dean I was going to personally choose the successor because I thought this was the most visible position at the university," Mr. Freedman recalled. "Everybody said the obvious candidate was Frank Conroy, and in fact I began to get my backup. But then I met him, and he was the first and only person I offered the job to."

Mr. Conroy, whose one novel, "Body and Soul" (1993), is about a poor boy who grows up to be a famous pianist and composer, compared teaching to playing jazz. "You have to be fast, able to think on your feet and able to trust yourself to improvise well within certain strictures," he said.

His students remember the care and instinctive sympathy he brought to the task. Mr. Halberstam said: "I think what made him a great teacher was that he was so wounded himself; he had a very good sense for the wounds in other people. He knew what a frail business this being a writer is."

Another former student, the novelist Chris Offutt, said: "He emphasized clarity above everything else. But he was also passionate about literature and about reading. He was the boss man, but he had this incredible youthful glee for writing that inspired you to want to write yourself."

Ms. Phillips, the novelist, recalled: "He paid attention to the work line by line. He believed that the work leads the writer, and not the other way around. He used to say that in his own writing he'd read and re-read what he'd written the day before until he knew what to do next."

Another symbol that Mr. Conroy was a role model, Ms. Phillips said, was that "he lived a big life." He was, Mr. Halberstam recalled, "a very cool guy -- a great hipster," adding, "Frank talked a kind of jazz vernacular that would have been an affectation except it was real."

Mr. Conroy was a good enough pool player to have once run the table twice, and, though self-taught, a good enough pianist to have jammed with Charles Mingus. In his 2002 essay collection "Dogs Bark, but the Caravan Rolls On," Mr. Conroy recalled how he once apologized to Mingus for being a klutz. "You are an authentic primitive," Mingus said. "That is true. But you also swing."

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