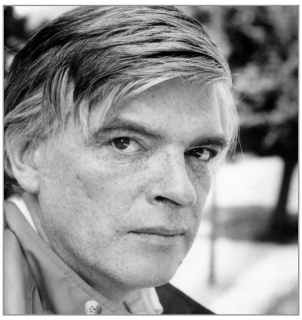
Frank Conroy

AN INTERVIEW

by Lacy Crawford



Frank Conroy was born in 1936 to a Danish mother and an American father. His father, a manic-depressive, died young, and Conroy was raised by his mother and stepfather in New York City and central Florida. He sold his first short story while a senior at Haverford College. His first book, *Stop-Time*, was published to great acclaim in 1967 and has never gone out of print. Since then he has published four more books: a collection of stories, *Midair*, a novel, *Body and Soul*, a collection of essays, *Dogs Bark, but the Caravan Rolls On: Observations Then and Now*, and most recently a short book about his long-time island home, *Nantucket: Time and Tide*. His essays and articles have appeared in *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, and other magazines. He has been awarded fellowships by the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations and the National Council of the Arts, served as the chair of the literature program of the National Endowment for the Arts, played squash with Norman Mailer and piano with Charles Mingus and the Rolling Stones, once ran a pool table twice in a row (twenty-three balls pocketed) and has been director of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa since 1987. Conroy will retire in 2005 to Nantucket, where he and his wife, Maggie, met during an island winter, and where his three sons and three grandchildren still visit every summer.

FOR THE PAST EIGHTEEN YEARS, Frank Conroy has lived in Iowa City, Iowa, where he is director of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. His house is one of several on a quiet street of mature trees, across the river from the university and up a gentle rise. On the March morning we met, the street was quiet and the trees bare. Conroy's open garage door revealed one sports car and one SUV, standard issue for the neighborhood. Across the road a boy bundled against the chill shot hoops in his driveway. The lot adjacent to the Conroy home was vacant, a fact that, Conroy would note, caused his family to fall in love with the house: they always had light coming from the direction of the open space, and it offered a place for their gentle yellow Labrador, Gracie, to wander; and the day I arrived, though Conroy's youngest son, Tim, was all but grown up and preparing for college entrance examinations, a rope scooter still hung from two trees on opposite ends of the lot.

Conroy's wife, Maggie, met me at the door with Gracie. Inside, the house was airy despite the thousands of books that lined the walls and rested in piles beneath chairs and on tabletops.

The books were actively in use, thumbed through and read, left on the sideboard, countertops, everywhere. Several attempts to organize them had failed, the most apparent of which was Maggie's plan, logical enough, to organize them by color. One wall in the breakfast room held only black books, shading to navy blue on the lower shelves. The coffee table in the sunroom was piled high with MFA theses awaiting Conroy's pencil, and it was easy to imagine that in a few years' time some of these manuscripts would emerge as published novels by Iowa graduates.

Conroy's own works rested on a shelf in a glass-fronted cabinet in the living room. The books there included several editions of *Stop-Time*, his best-known title. An account of an extraordinarily bright, sensitive boy all but abandoned by his mother, *Stop-Time* became an instant classic on publication and strongly influenced the memoir in American literature.

Our interview took place over two days and consisted of two recorded sessions of several hours each. At the end of our first session, Conroy took me to his office at the University of Iowa, a few minutes by car. His office was in a library lined with published books written by Iowa graduates. Mounted on an easel were the plans for a new wing of the building, including a library, for which ground had been broken the spring before. Conroy beamed about this, as he did about everything relating to the Workshop. He led me through each room of the small building that housed the program, and in one office pointed to crate upon crate of files: "Those are the folks that get a No." It was admission season.

At his direction I found a classroom at the end of the hall with the words

MEANING
SENSE
CLARITY

chalked on the blackboard, left over from a recent seminar but as if chiseled in stone. The words served as his first lecture and were his mantra as teacher and writer both.

After we left his office, Conroy took us by a local Co-op grocery store, of much interest to him for its organic and exotic products of unusual sophistication for the deep Midwest. Conroy recalled to me his own childhood poverty and hunger, shook his head, and set off down the aisles of the fancy grocery store, sampling olives from salty bins with his fingers. He bought the ingredients for his famous but simple Nantucket Chicken, which he made that night. *(Place boneless skinless chicken breasts under cling-wrap and pound with a bottle of wine; coat in one beaten egg, breadcrumbs, and grated parmesan; sauté in butter; enjoy with the wine.)* After dinner Conroy moved to the baby grand in the living room and played some well-muscled, quick-footed jazz. Atop the piano, a stack of honors (the National Medal for the Humanities, the F. Wendell Miller Chair at the University of Iowa) awaited the framer, fluttering as he played.

On the second day, a Sunday, the interview lasted until early afternoon, when Maggie arrived from town with the Sunday *New York Times*. Conroy made a beeline for the acrostic puzzle, and it was clear all talk of writing was finished for the day. During both days of the interview the family moved throughout the house—Maggie and Tim coming and going, exchanging brief queries and affections, and always the dog, Gracie, shuffled about, nosing the tea cookies on the coffee table, or asking to be walked. About this dog, Conroy has written that she "seems remarkably intelligent, comports herself with dignity and can read minds (at least the minds, on occasion, of myself and my wife)." Gracie's quiet panting and deep rumbling snores formed a constant backdrop to conversation. On more than one occasion Conroy gestured to his living room, the piano, the dog, and commented on his bourgeois world, as much in apology as in wonder. The hungry boy from *Stop-Time* had not had it easy: in short stories and essays Conroy tracked the breakup of his first marriage and his long struggle to make a living as a writer. When he was called to Iowa, many of life's practicalities grew easier, and he is clearly grateful in the manner of someone who has not forgotten a perilous childhood.

During the interviews, Conroy sat on the couch at a large window through which streamed the bright light of the Midwestern spring. The sunlight reflected in his eyeglasses, and his eyebrows hinted at the humor underlying so much of his commentary. *Stop-Time,* for all of its scenes of sorrow and unmet needs, is full of wit; the charisma that carried the boy to adulthood is easy to detect in the man he became. At one point in the interview, Conroy told a story about Norman Mailer reading *Stop-Time*. They'd become friends in the jazz clubs in Manhattan, and Mailer believed Conroy was "just" a pianist; when Conroy announced, four years later, that he had a book, he did so on the squash court in the midst of a match, as if apropos of nothing. Mailer "put his racquet down, and said, 'Don't ask me to read it. I've lost friends, Frank, I can't do it.' " Nevertheless, Mailer read his friend's book, and when they next met, he instructed Conroy, "From now on, Frank, when you talk to someone, there will always be three people in the room: you, him, and the person he thinks you are because of your book."

LACY CRAWFORD

Because your first book is a memoir, it is natural for people to want to know what happened next. In the introduction to your collection of essays, *Dogs Bark, but the Caravan Rolls On,* you write that "the smaller things—stories, articles and essays" now seem to "extend the line of the eighteen-year-old boy ... into the present." And indeed, to some extent, they do. But there is a span of time that you haven't written very much of, and that is the time after the events described in *Stop-Time* were over but before you'd written that book, and instead were writing a novel.

FRANK CONROY

Well, I was married to my first wife. We met in college, and in those days, the Eisenhower years, it was certainly different than it is now. You went steady in college, you didn't date

more than one girl, and you got married at the end. And, in fact, every single marriage between the Haverford guys and the Bryn Mawr girls whom I knew in my generation eventually broke up. We were all much too young, but there were societal pressures. So I was writing a novel, and it took me quite some time, and when I was about halfway through I realized the novel wasn't going to work, but I just had to finish it. And it was terrible. I didn't know enough, I didn't know anything. I was under the spell of Flaubert, which is the wrong spell to be under when you're twenty-five years old. It was comic, in a way. But I really broke my ass, I worked very hard. The book taught me a lot about writing good sentences, good paragraphs, and about what's inside the prose that illuminates it. The book wasn't any good, but it was well written. It took more energy than it otherwise would have because I knew it was a failure halfway through, but I wanted to be a writer so badly I couldn't think of doing anything else.

CRAWFORD

How did you know the book was dead?

CONROY

I could feel it. But my editor at Viking wanted to read it, and Viking had a legal right to see it. So I showed it to him, and we agreed it wasn't any good. I went into the period described in my essays. I was drinking a great deal, running around, staying up all night—I was one of the first regulars at Elaine's. I had no training for anything. I was very thoughtless about practical stuff, I was just writing and writing and playing the piano, and that's pretty much all that I did. And of course a lot of it was bravado. I mean, when I was a kid, we didn't have running water, electricity, I got scabies, I mean, it was horrific. Now I've got three children, and I just can't understand how anyone could treat children like that. It's beyond imagining. I used bravado to protect myself when we lived in poverty and when I was weak and I failed everything. I failed four subjects out of five my senior year of high school; in fact, I didn't go right to college, I went to Europe just to get out of my family situation, if you could really call it a family. It wasn't a family. So I was quite vulnerable, and I used a certain amount of bravado to pump myself up. An old lover of mine who knew me when I was young, she said, You know what you did, Frank?—she's an historian—and she talked about these Plains Indian tribes who for thousands of years had lived on the plains, but then the ecological balance between the flora and fauna began to change and they had to go into the woods. And their whole culture forbade them from going into the woods. They were terrified. They would stop at the edge of the woods, build a fire, paint themselves up, and run around the fire talking about how brave they were. She said, That's you, Frank. And this woman really knew me.

CRAWFORD

The prologue and epilogue of *Stop-Time* tell of you driving very fast on English country roads. How did you come to live in England?

CONROY

I'd always loved England. We were so young, and the dollar went pretty far in those days, the days of the old pound. I had a little money from my grandmother, and my wife had some money. Mine eventually ran out; hers, thank God, did not, so we could do it. We lived in the country, very simply, so I could write. I wrote music, too: there was a big band that used to practice at a jazz club there, and I wrote some charts for them. Since I was a self-taught musician, it was painstaking work. Reading, writing, and music were all I was doing. Most of the time my wife was sick with very bad hepatitis, which went on for months, so everything was very insular, very quiet. And then we came back to the United States.

CRAWFORD

But while you were writing that first novel, you were teaching yourself to write, you were creating a perfect doll, rather than giving birth.

CONROY

Right. That's it, that's it.

CRAWFORD

You were practicing.

CONROY

I continued my lifelong habit of reading sometimes a book a day, sometimes two. And that period in England turned out to have been a gestation period; the unconscious was gathering itself for the task. I threw the novel away finally, and it took me a while to reorganize. I'd been under the spell of Flaubert: *Stay out of the book, keep out of the book, don't go there at all, just let the carriage go down the road, let the sun shine* ... you know. So with *Stop-Time* I went in the absolutely opposite direction. The book started after my first wife and I went to dinner in Brooklyn with a couple who were Harvard and Smith. We'd met them somewhere, and they seemed very nice, so we had dinner with them and everybody was sort of talking—we were all in our early twenties—and I realized that they thought my background was the same as theirs. They didn't understand where I came from at all. I didn't have an accent, though my mother was a Danish immigrant. I scarcely knew my father. But these people assumed I was like them. As my wife and I walked home from dinner, I thought, Well, I'm going to write a little something, and that's how I started the book. As soon as I was five pages in I realized the material was alive. Then it took almost four years.

CRAWFORD

From the beginning of *Stop-Time,* you knew what you had and what to do with it?

CONROY

No. To write *Stop-Time,* I had to go well past any imaginative boundaries I'd set for myself. And there was the feeling that every writer has described: you don't feel like you're doing it—it's passing through you in some way. Also, I was able to write the book because I'd read so much. Before I got to college, I read everything. I read the Russians, the Brits, the French, the Americans. I was years into college before I was assigned a book I hadn't already read. In the beginning I read in order to escape my circumstances. I absorbed so many of the conventions and the rules and the rhythms of good prose. When I read Orwell, I couldn't believe it, it was so beautiful.

CRAWFORD

That comment about going past imaginative boundaries reminds me of a breathtaking moment in *Body and Soul,* when the young pianist Claude learns a lesson by hanging a string with a glass ball from his fingertip:

> The boy walked over and faced him. He received a glass ball about the size of a peach pit attached to a string.
>
> "Hold it like this." Fredericks also had a glass ball. He held the string between thumb and forefinger, the ball hanging motionless below. The boy did likewise. "You will feel there is an attraction between these pieces of glass," Fredericks said. "Like magnetism, even though they are glass."
>
> Fredericks reached out and pushed Claude's glass ball in such a way that it swung in a circle. "Do not move your hand or your fingers. Remain absolutely still and let the ball swing. All by itself."
>
> Claude obeyed, watching the glass ball go around.
>
> Then, very gently, Fredericks swung his own ball so that its circle came within two or three inches of the path of Claude's.
>
> "Now keep still and watch."
>
> When, after a moment, the orbits of the two pieces of glass brought them near each other, Claude both saw and felt his ball move slightly out of its orbit toward the other one. It was quite distinct. A little jump.
>
> "You see?" Fredericks said. "You held perfectly still?"
>
> "Yes." Claude was amazed. "Magic. Is it magic?"
>
> Fredericks took the glass balls and put them back on his desk. "Some people would have you believe so, but it isn't. It only feels like magic."
>
> "Well, what is it, then? What made it do that?"
>
> "You did.... Listen to me, Claude," Fredericks said. "This is important. It's because you believed."
>
> "But that's like magic. You said—"
>
> "I said you did it. You did it without knowing it. You understand the implications? Anything you can imagine, you can play. Concentrate, believe, and your fingers will do it."
>
> "My God," Claude whispered.

CONROY

Yes, yes, I'll never forget writing that—

CRAWFORD

And I also am made to think of you, as portrayed in *Stop-Time*, with a yo-yo string on your finger pad.

CONROY

Yes, that's in there.

CRAWFORD

Claude's taught about being able to do something he didn't think he could do. Which has a little bit to do with manual dexterity beyond what he can consciously feel he's doing, and a lot to do with belief in how much practice he's done. It is a physicality, a conjuring ...

CONROY

Yes, yes, yes it is a conjuring—that's a good word!

CRAWFORD

So did that happen to you with your writing?

CONROY

Oh, yes. It happened in *Stop-Time*. In one sense I suppose it was bad that it took me so long to write it. In another sense it was good, because I absorbed a great deal more than I would have had I written it in a year and a half. It stretched out for a long time. There are a lot of reasons for that, the crudest being that it was like psychoanalyzing myself. I'd finish a chapter and I'd be fucking exhausted, so I'd go out and drink and chase skirts.

CRAWFORD

The writing in *Stop-Time* is so good that readers don't ever see a learning curve in your skill.

CONROY

The writing part of the learning curve began in college. I had a very good teacher, so I learned what it was to be edited, and I followed all of it very carefully. He was sort of a father figure to me, so I worked harder. I was trying to impress him. But my first knowledge of writing started with reading as a child, through adolescence, high school—I failed everything, but I was reading until two or three in the morn-

ing. When I was a kid, paperback books were 25 cents, and big thick ones, like Dickens, were 35 cents. The publishing of them was almost indiscriminate; it came out of the Second World War. I'd go down to Lexington Avenue, to the cigar shop, where they had a wall of paperbacks. A guy came with new books every two weeks. And I kept up.

CRAWFORD

You've written that you had six or seven hundred books that had belonged to your father.

CONROY

His books were hardback. He had once been a rich man, a Southern gentleman, always very well dressed. He wanted to be a writer and could not be. He was a manic-depressive, a drunk. I saw some of the stuff he tried to write. For a while he was an abortive literary agent, but he was too sick. What he could do was read, and I inherited his library. A lot of his books were beautiful leather-bound editions.

CRAWFORD

Do you still have them?

CONROY

No. I don't know where they went. When I went to Europe after high school, I must have had four hundred paperbacks in my room, a stack ... and when I came back from Europe, my mother had thrown them all out. Just astonishing. But anyway, the development of the writing was a very gradual function of reading and imagination, with a certain kind of perfectionism absent from the rest of my life. I could really sweat blood over a paragraph. That's how I learned. I saw the stuff get better. I was a sophisticated reader, finally with enough perspective on my own stuff to tell the good from the indifferent.

I'd read so many books by so many hundreds of writers that I didn't think writing a book was completely impossible. Early on, I had a feeling that literature was a very big world, and anyone could get in there! That helped a lot, because books were my intimate companions. I felt that literature was a democratic world in which you didn't have to depend on anybody. You see, there was nobody in my life I could depend on. So it had to be done by myself. But then I don't know. When I was writing each of those chapters in *Stop-Time,* I was in a trance.

CRAWFORD

Did you write them from start to finish, all the way through?

CONROY

That's just how it came. Instinctively, without thinking, I set up the forms. Now, I look and I see, Yeah, very early on I set up a way in which I could talk as an adult about the boy: I use parentheses, the tense changes ... you have to train the reader to follow the narrator implicitly, Okay, this is what he's doing, this is how he's doing this. I did all that completely by instinct. I didn't understand it until after I'd finished the book.

I still write in longhand. I couldn't compose on the typewriter, so I would write in longhand, and then, as I typed it up, that was a draft, and then there would be another draft and another draft ... I think I typed the book by hand at least seven times. And each time, I was editing, and correcting, and changing little stuff. But again, I just had faith in it. Nobody can hold a whole book in his head. It's impossible. You can't do it. So you—Marilynne [Robinson] and I talk about this a lot—you jump in the pool, and then you learn how to swim. You don't really know a lot about what's going to happen. You just can't! If you do, then you're a hack.

CRAWFORD

Well, certainly, you knew how this story ended.

CONROY

Generally, but I didn't know where it was going to end. And, in fact, I turned out to use a very conventional frame: he goes to college, he finally gets a break. Boy, was I lucky to get into Haverford. Considering my high school experience, it's amazing they took me. But I aced my SATs. I took them in Denmark.

CRAWFORD

One of the extraordinary aspects of *Stop-Time* is that the writer holds still. And the boy comes to him.

CONROY

Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

CRAWFORD

And because of that, we don't get the sense of the writer moving through a process of writing, so we don't doubt the intention.

CONROY

Oh, it's passion recollected in tranquility. Although I was not as tranquil as all that!

CRAWFORD

William Styron praised it for lacking self-pity. One might ask, what's so wrong with self-pity?

CONROY

It puts the reader in a position of being asked to sympathize with the ill fortune of another person, to be the witness rather than the co-creator, which is what I want out of the reader, someone whose energy is pouring in. I'll tell you what I think motivated the writing. Rather than, Oh, what a tough time I've had, one of the engines that drove the book—beside the fact that I wanted to be a writer—was anger. I wrote the book to try to get even, in a way, to extricate myself, Hey, fuck you guys! I wasn't aware of it then, but in retrospect I see it was definitely there.

CRAWFORD

The danger is that some of that anger will be directed at yourself.

CONROY

Oh, sure, I've had very self-destructive tendencies all my life. I don't have them anymore. But I was so lucky, so many times, to escape from various really dangerous situations that I got myself into.

CRAWFORD

Were you daring the universe to make something happen?

CONROY

I don't know if that's what it was about—or just some kind of familiar sea in which I could swim.

CRAWFORD

I'm interested because risk is so central; there is such a sense of anticipation in *Stop-Time* related to courting danger.

CONROY

Yes, I always assumed that things were somehow going to get better. It may have been a childish desire for the return of the father, which didn't happen, because he was dead. And my stepfather, he was a good guy, but he wasn't a father; he was my mother's lover.

CRAWFORD

Is he still alive?

CONROY

No, he's dead. They're all dead.

CRAWFORD

Your sister, the girl known as Allison, too?

CONROY

No, she's seventy-one. She almost died last year, of mumps! It's going to be a very famous case, because it's so incredibly rare.

CRAWFORD

Did Allison have children? Did she marry the man she snuggled with on the couch?

CONROY

Yes, yes. They're still together. They had two children, and she has grandchildren.

CRAWFORD

Are you close?

CONROY

No, not particularly. Closer now than we were for a long time. You see, the family wasn't really a family. You think of a family as a circle, everybody looking in, around a fire. We were all looking out, each in a different direction, nobody looking at each other. There was no centrality. We were like transients.

CRAWFORD

Like in a bus terminal.

CONROY

Yeah.

CRAWFORD

And your younger sister, India, who's known as Jessica?

CONROY

She lives on Nantucket, works in a bank, and is a waitress.

CRAWFORD

Does she have children?

CONROY

No, she never got married.

CRAWFORD

One of the questions people ask novelists is about imagination: How do they imagine characters, discover plot? But in the case of *Stop-Time,* the appropriate question is about memory.

CONROY

Well, again, that's a case of jumping in without knowing what's going to happen. I didn't remember everything about the past when I started the book, and I had a lot of chronology mixed up, and a lot of stuff was just repressed. The act of concentrating on the writing and trying to write perfect sentences opens closed doors. There's an example I use to explain it. In *Stop-Time,* there's a scene in which the boy and his cousin go over the seawall. His cousin is—

CRAWFORD

—pretending to spearfish?

CONROY

Exactly. Okay, so that's all that I knew: where we were going. And I got there, and it was more or less, Okay, sit back, smoke a cigarette, drink a couple of cups of coffee, and think, Well, what now? So, more or less arbitrarily, I thought, Okay, take them back to the house. So I described them walking toward the house, and I saw it in my mind's eye. The house was my memory of a real house that existed. In my mind, the screen door opened, and nobody was there. And in my mind's eye I literally looked down to the bottom of the doorway, and there was a little cocker spaniel who had pushed the door open—a black cocker spaniel—and then I remembered that its name was Shadow. That's how it happens: one thing trips off another thing, trips off another thing, and it comes from concentration. Everything in that book happened, as far as I know. Everything happened. But a lot of the details came like that, just like going to the movies.

CRAWFORD

Well, that's exactly how it feels to read it. It is so keenly observed, and you were such a keen observer, but there is no written awareness of the enormous events taking place in the country at that time. You're nine when the bomb is dropped. It's Eisenhower, the expressways, the space race and Sputnik, the Cold War, the suburbs ...

CONROY

Well, that was an unconscious decision that turned out to be right. A sixteen- or seventeen-year-old kid can read *Stop-Time,* and it doesn't feel dated, because it deliberately avoids any chronological events, which puts a lot of pressure on the reader's perception of the kid. And it's true, children live in a world that's sort of without time.

CRAWFORD

Your memory is extraordinarily vivid, and fluid; yet you have written that you don't remember much of your life before you were about eight. And the only chapter in *Stop-Time* from that time is about Donald, the sadistic piano instructor who used to visit your apartment to teach you. That chapter is placed out of chronological order, which is unusual in the book.

CONROY

I don't recall a rationale for the placement, but it's understandable that I placed him separately. He ended up committing suicide; he jumped out the window. He was a sadistic, sick man. After he taught me for a while, I thought, well, that's enough of that, I'll teach myself! So it makes sense that the chapter about him would stand apart, even though I don't remember thinking about the chronology. That was another unconscious decision, and a good one.

CRAWFORD

Stop-Time starts with the father, with the scene in which the boy sees his father for the last time before the father dies. You were twelve; then the story retraces its steps. Perhaps most stories about the son begin with the father—?

CONROY

Yes.

CRAWFORD

And he dies, right there on the second page. Then, once the book is up and running, we don't hear any more about him. He's gone.

CONROY

Well, yes! He was! He was gone. He didn't get to come back.

CRAWFORD

In fact, there's a scene in an essay you wrote later in which you're walking down the street, having gone back down as a teenager to Florida from New York to work as an

usher in a movie theater, and a woman comes out of a bookstore and says, My God, you must be Phil Conroy's son! And she comes out of a *bookstore*—

CONROY

Yes! It's true, she did!

CRAWFORD

You write about that ushering job in *Stop-Time* but don't mention the woman in the bookstore.

CONROY

No, I don't. I did that by instinct. That scene doesn't belong in *Stop-Time* anywhere; it would have disturbed the inner harmonies of the book, by compromising the connection to the missing, the absent, father.

You see, when I saw my father in the hospital that last time, when he was dying, he asked me, "Do you believe in universal military training?" You know, the draft. And here I was, twelve years old, and I said, "Yeah," thinking, in general, I should have a positive attitude! And that was what we said to each other.

(*Conroy shakes his head, remembering, and gives a little laugh. Then he gets up and heads for the glass cabinet across the room, returning with a first edition of* Stop-Time.)

CRAWFORD

What did it feel like to hold that in your hands for the first time?

CONROY

Oh, my God, a victory of immense proportions. It was literally the dream of my life come true, but in a way separate from my ambition of writing the book. It only sold seven thousand copies. I told that to Saul Bellow, and he said, Hey, tell me about it! *Dangling Man* sold four thousand copies!

CRAWFORD

But you and I both know that was a different time, and *Stop-Time* wasn't supported by a marketing and public relations machine as it would be today.

CONROY

Oh, it sure wasn't. In the culture at the time, everything was drugs, and beatniks, the whole beginning of the revolution. And there I was with a sort of semiclassical book, and they didn't know whether it was fiction or nonfiction. Just before the

book was published, the editor called me up and said, Should we call this fiction or nonfiction? And off the top of my head, I said, Everything in the book actually happened, so I'd call it nonfiction. Which they did. It was nominated for the National Book Award under the Belles Lettres category, and it didn't win. About five years later, I spoke to one of the judges, who told me that the fiction prize winner that year, Thornton Wilder, was the compromise candidate because the judges couldn't agree on the other books. Then, this judge told me, Do you realize that if your book had been listed as fiction, you would have won? And I told myself, Oh shit, there you go, smart ass ...

CRAWFORD

But you gave the true answer: it was nonfiction.

CONROY

Yes, yes it was. I think what caused a certain amount of confusion both at the retail level in the bookstores and among the critics was that, when the first chapters were published in *The New Yorker* in 1965, it was almost unheard of to use fictional techniques to write about real situations. My name stayed the same, but I changed every other name. Readers just didn't know what to do with it. I don't want to sound immodest, but the book had a real influence on how people think about that kind of writing. Unbelievable things happened after its publication. The literary world took it up, and I was invited to every dinner, and met every writer. And who was I, a kid from nowhere?

CRAWFORD

This was New York City in 1967.

CONROY

Yes, and my life split in the sense that my wife was very much a homebody and threatened by this incredibly dramatic change. But I couldn't resist it; I'd been an outsider for so long, it was intoxicating. I was very impressed to meet famous people, who seemed somehow more real than myself. And also the action attracted me a lot. We'd sit at Elaine's, and we'd drink and laugh and talk and whatever. It was tremendously exciting, but my life was completely split. There was the WASP household, with the little fireplace, and the little boys upstairs in their little jammies, and I'd go out and come home at three o'clock in the morning. And because the marriage was not a good one, I spent a great deal of time at night with women. Lovers. It was an extended boyhood, in a sense. People thought I knew what I was doing when I wrote *Stop-Time,* but I didn't. I knew I was a very good writer, but it had all been an act of faith. I started it thinking, This book will save me somehow.

Writing is a funny business. At its higher levels, there's so much involved that we don't understand, and can't explain. One reason so many writers are anxious, drink so much, and fuck up their lives is that they hate not being able to control the writing completely. They've always got a big bet on the table, and the roulette wheel is spinning and spinning, and they can't control it, and they're afraid.

CRAWFORD

So, after *Stop-Time?*

CONROY

I didn't think of writing as a career. My feeling was, I did it. I've done it. I felt no great pressure to write another book. I had no idea what to write.

CRAWFORD

Did you worry that you wouldn't be able to do it again?

CONROY

I knew I was going to write at least one more good book, though I couldn't do it at the time. And then a lot of things happened that took up some years. My marriage ended. My mother contracted breast cancer, and I took care of her until she died. And then I left New York for Nantucket. I had no money at all, and no job.

CRAWFORD

You haven't written much about your mother's death.

CONROY

Well, in one story, *Celestial Events,* I describe the son bringing his mom home from the hospital to die, and the eclipse of the sun that preceded her death. An amazing event.

CRAWFORD

And the voice of his dead mother coming to him at the end of the story, teaching him to cry—did that happen too?

CONROY

No, that was imagined.

CRAWFORD

Your relationship with your mother was not easy.

(At this point Conroy pulls from the glass-fronted cabinet a different first edition of Stop-Time, *this one bound in leather. Inside the front cover is pasted a small card that reads: "To Frank, with pride and respect, love and understanding." The note is signed "Mother" and "Xmas 1967.")*

CONROY

This must have been so hard for her. She was not a natural mother, you know. She had children, but she wasn't maternal. When we lived in Florida, we had no running water, no electricity, no money. When she made a sandwich, instead of butter, she used bacon fat from a can. I almost threw up, and I was starving. But it wasn't her fault, really.

CRAWFORD

You've written very briefly about a collapse.

CONROY

It happened when I was writing *Stop-Time,* before it was published. And in those days they didn't treat depression with pills, so you really had to tough it out. I was experiencing panic and paralyzing anxiety. I got a shrink, and that took a lot of time and energy. I had a classical analysis, not like these days where you go in once a week. It was four days a week for three years. He was a nice man. I don't think he sufficiently understood the society in which I was swimming. He was German and didn't know enough about American culture. But he understood me fairly well.

CRAWFORD

Did it help?

CONROY

It sure did. In the emergency of the breakdown, it helped a great deal. But, Jesus Christ, it was expensive.

CRAWFORD

Did you stop reading during the breakdown?

CONROY

No. That was one thing I could do. I was pretty much paralyzed in every other way.

CRAWFORD

How did you get out of it?

CONROY

I don't know, I really don't. I guess tenacity.

CRAWFORD

When did you know it was lifting?

CONROY

When I woke up in the morning without feeling fear before my eyes opened.

CRAWFORD

Did you write through it?

CONROY

Not very much. You burn so much energy coping with the breakdown that you're depleted.

CRAWFORD

Writing takes an enormous amount of energy because you have to generate the chutzpah to do it. Annie Dillard says you have to open the door to the room with a chair, shouting, *Simba!*

CONROY

(Laughs.) She's right.

CRAWFORD

How or where do you find the courage?

CONROY

Once again, I think it's an extension of being immersed in books all your life. You realize how miraculous and mysterious the act of writing is. You've been reading and listening to the voices of many hundreds of writers, and they succeeded, so perhaps you can. But you have fears, everybody has fears. Look at Joyce at the end, on his deathbed, saying, Doesn't anybody understand?

When I moved to Nantucket, I didn't know what was going to happen to me. I wasn't making enough money from writing to pay for my life.

CRAWFORD

What role has pure ambition played, if any?

CONROY

My ambition was relatively modest. I just wanted to be part of literature. And I've been very lucky as a writer and a teacher. I never thought of it as a career, or of producing a novel every couple of years. Literature seemed big and important, and I just wanted one, quiet little corner. But I couldn't make a living at it.

CRAWFORD

You were writing for money—

CONROY

Sometimes you can produce good work that way, yes.

CRAWFORD

Well, and you did.

CONROY

I also did stupid things. I wasted time with writing for the movies, and ran around doing jazz things at $300 a pop, when we were really broke ... Maggie's had quite a trip with me. We've been together thirty-two years. You know, I was completely broke when she met me. But she never wavered.

CRAWFORD

Neither did you.

CONROY

No, well, I was very lucky to find her, given that it was complete happenstance. She was hitchhiking, and I picked her up. And later on Maggie was the one who answered the phone in 1977 when the call came from Iowa. Then she forgot to tell me. A few days later, she said, Some place in Iowa called you. I called back; they invited me to teach for a semester. We drove out in a Volkswagen through the biggest snowstorm the country had seen in years, and we stayed a year. Then I taught at various places, and when Jack Leggett retired as the director of the Writers' Workshop, they did a search, and that's how I got here, seventeen years ago.

CRAWFORD

Were you frightened to take the post?

CONROY

I was very nervous the first time I came to Iowa, because I'd never taught. I just did an imitation of what my teacher at Haverford did for me. And I was delighted to

discover that it worked! So when I came back as the director I wasn't the least bit nervous. I knew that it was the job for me, and it has been. I've had incredible students—Jayne Anne Phillips, Stephanie Vaughn, Chris Offutt, Adam Haslett, Julie Orringer, ZZ Packer. It never repeats; it's always different. And I was able to write *Body and Soul* here, because my life was stable. Most of my work has occurred in periods when I didn't have to worry about money, when I was relatively happy, and things were fairly calm.

CRAWFORD

What makes you happy?

CONROY

Oh, it doesn't take much. You know, sometimes something from my past—the poverty or the brutality—will come up, and Maggie will say, "Frank, that was a long time ago." I think an important part of happiness is having a counterforce to whatever you were afraid of—a sense of safety, particularly if you win it for yourself. I'm proud of what I've done.

CRAWFORD

Yours is an exceptional legacy, as writer and teacher.

CONROY

Well, that's nice! I think that I've helped people, and I'm proud of that. And there are certain personality traits that help. For instance, you have to be a little bit of a performer. My improvising with my jazz quartet is close to my teaching. You have to be fast, able to think on your feet, and able to trust yourself to improvise well within certain strictures. Once students realize that you're not going to bullshit them, they trust you. They don't necessarily agree with you, but they trust you.

CRAWFORD

Iowa has become a monolith; some might say it's a powerhouse of literary writing that counteracts the current trends in publishing.

CONROY

Yes, yes. And also counteracts the so-called supremacy of pop culture. The workshop stands for high culture, and I don't hesitate to use the elitist phrase. The students who come here work incredibly hard for what in the long run may not be much of a reward, certainly not a career. What they're essentially after is doing excellent work.

CRAWFORD

How are new students for the workshop chosen each year?

CONROY

We're reading for admissions now—760 applicants for twenty-five places. I have help from the teaching fellows who screen the manuscripts. I don't read all of every one, but I read some of every one, and some I read twice when I have to rank them.

CRAWFORD

When you're reading a manuscript, can you tell right away what level of work it is?

CONROY

Pretty much. But even when the work is good, you can't necessarily tell how the writer will develop. Some of them fold; the curve from being talented to making a real accomplishment is hard, and not everyone can do it, and sometimes, even with someone who could do it, fate takes a hand, life intervenes and alters the path. What I look for when I'm reading applications is not necessarily the technically best or smoothest writing. I pay attention to the pressure of a person behind the prose, and when it's there, I sit up. I deliberately take chances with admissions sometimes. Somebody who's sort of off the wall, in a way, but really good, or somebody writing in a way that I would never write. Twenty-four students graduated in the class of 2001, and at this moment twelve of them have literary books in the bookstores.

CRAWFORD

What about the other twelve?

CONROY

We'll see. If history is any guide, another three of four of them will publish in the next five years. Most of the class will be published, an unrivaled rate of success. And it's not that we're such good teachers. It's the concentration of a lot of very good young talent, from a lot of different directions, with a lot of different aesthetics and ways of seeing things, and they're all in it together for two years, and they're really in it. That's what does it. The best students come here, and we know what to do with them. We recognize our responsibility to them. We don't tell them what to write, and we don't tell them how to write it. We take what they bring, and try to save them time. Often more can be learned from stories that don't work than from stories that do. When a really good story comes up for discussion, we just sit around and say, Wow, that was wonderful. The discussion takes five minutes.

CRAWFORD

Does that happen often?

CONROY

More often than you'd think. When it does happen, I will occasionally say, You can publish that; I guarantee you it will get published, so send it out. And I have never been wrong. In seventeen years, I have never been wrong. And I haven't said it more than twenty times.

CRAWFORD

Has that become a myth among the students?

CONROY

I don't know. I try to deflect projections in order to keep going without getting too involved. You have to keep a certain distance. When I was a young writer, I thought there was a center to the world of writing, but there isn't, and you have to discover that for yourself, particularly if you come from a background like mine where you think everyone's in the center except you. But then you realize, no. And I tell some of the students, if they ask me, that there's no center, and it's hard for them. Writing is lonely work, and there's no way around it. When I was a young writer among other young writers, we never talked about writing. We'd go out to play and didn't want to put anything at risk.

CRAWFORD

What's at risk when you write?

CONROY

Everything. It's like going into a dark room and working at a sculpture. You're scared that you're going to turn the lights on, and the piece won't be what you thought. You can't control it. Everybody does weak work. There isn't a single writer who hasn't done weak work. You don't see it, but they all do. There's no way to write only perfect stuff. You have to have the courage to write bad stuff, because you're going to.

CRAWFORD

It must be terrifying, too, for student writers.

CONROY

For some of them, it is. I don't think new students come here without a certain amount of the imposter complex, because the program looms so large now.

CRAWFORD

Do you address or try to allay that difficulty?

CONROY

In class, I insist that there be no reference to the author. The only thing that matters is the text. When a book or story is published, the author is not going to be there next to the reader. The work becomes separate from the writer, and the writer must give the work enough strength that it has its own life. Once the students understand that the workshop process is impersonal, we can take a piece apart as much as we need to, and afterward all go out to the bar. Nobody likes to discover their work isn't as strong as they thought, but most of the time it's not the teacher pointing it out, it's their peers—people they respect.

CRAWFORD

That isn't always the tone in workshops.

CONROY

Oh, it's not like the old days—they are all very protective of each other. But they're not afraid to say, This story is bullshit.

CRAWFORD

How many of them are working on novels?

CONROY

A lot of them are, but sometimes they're pretty cagey about it. They'll bring short stories to the workshop while the major Fabergé egg is being constructed in private.

CRAWFORD

How do you bring teachers to the workshop?

CONROY

Recently, visiting teachers have been younger writers, some of whom are workshop graduates. Once in a while an older writer who recognizes the importance of the workshop comes, sometimes at a financial loss. We try to entice the more established writers to visit, but it's a little tough because of where we are. Most writers live on the East and West Coasts, and we don't have as much money as some other universities. The University of Virginia pays Ann Beattie a hundred grand to teach one class, and we can't match that. We're supported by the taxpayers of Iowa—by farmers! So we have to keep track of who's getting divorced, et cetera—sounds ghoulish, but there it is.

CRAWFORD

It's often said that writing can't be taught.

CONROY

There are many things that can be communicated about writing. Practical stuff that actually works. For instance, beginning the work each day can be hard. The first hour can be sheer hell. But by sticking to a routine so that you subconsciously prepare for going into that state of concentration, you gather yourself, and starting again each day doesn't take so long.

CRAWFORD

In a way, you're passing on tribal knowledge?

CONROY

There's a sort of guild quality to it, and the urge to help. Writing is a very tough life, and you want to do anything you can to make it a little less tough for the ones coming up.

CRAWFORD

What are the enemies of that life?

CONROY

Television, decadent materialism, the basic thrust of American culture. The power and almost obscene wealth of parts of America resemble nothing so much as the Roman Empire. I don't understand why people aren't completely scandalized by the degrading of humanity through films and television over the last twenty years, a degradation of the soul. I'm not religious, but I insist on being able to use some of the concepts generally scorned in a secular society. The soul and spirituality are important parts of life. A lot of artists are trying to reclaim some of the language and territory so scorned. Life is a mystery, but you wouldn't know it from the mainstream of America, everybody watching a rerun on TV. The country is in danger, but I don't think that serious literature is in danger. Not yet. The spiritual emptiness of society is very deep and unsettling, so people are looking for something better.

CRAWFORD

Does literary criticism help adjust the contemporary social condition? Do current book reviews generally encourage the values you think are important?

CONROY

There's not an authoritative voice for criticism of fiction anymore. One of the things I do is run the Capote awards for literary criticism. Some worthwhile criticism is

being produced by writers like Frank Kermode, but there's not the rigorous collective sense of literary discussion and vision that there used to be. For instance, the *Sunday New York Times Book Review* has, if anything, accelerated the commercial side of publishing. The *Book Review* isn't as good as it ought to be. Nor is the *New York Review of Books* as vital and compelling as it might be.

CRAWFORD

What about the influence of *The New Yorker?*

CONROY

They've been publishing some really good stories lately. But there are certain things that they used to do and don't anymore. The magazine is important, but not as important as it once was.

CRAWFORD

The New Yorker, and the publishing industry as a whole, used to be more able to mentor writers.

CONROY

Yes. At *The New Yorker* I learned a lot from William Maxwell and William Shawn. Their editing of my work was equal to two years of an MFA program.

CRAWFORD

Have MFA programs sprung up, in part, to replace what's been lost in the publishing business?

CONROY

Some editors still do close editing, but the kind of relationship that Thomas Wolfe had with Maxwell Perkins is gone forever. That kind of editing will never happen again. But that doesn't explain the proliferation of MFA programs. People want to write. Many seem to think that the ability to write is a universal given. It's an odd notion, because if someone wants to play the piano, he has to learn the difference between B-flat and A-minor. But many people don't think that way about writing. They think, Well, I'll just go and write. Also, a lot of people major in English, but aren't interested in theory, so they continue on to MFA programs and discover they'd be better off doing something else. Also, there are economic and marketing factors driving the hundreds of MFA programs in the United States—they make money.

CRAWFORD

And break a lot of hearts.

CONROY

Well, you know Flannery O'Connor's remark about that. She said, We don't break enough of them! *(Laughs.)* Hey, it's not anybody's fault if you can't write. Hey, so what? Do something else!

CRAWFORD

What if you still want to write?

CONROY

Then you're punishing yourself needlessly. Hey, I'd like to be the conductor of an orchestra. I'd like Toscanini's job, thank you, that'd be great!

CRAWFORD

What do you tell your children about writing?

CONROY

I told them it's tough. I gave them books and encouraged them to be readers. But in the back of my mind I hoped they wouldn't choose to be writers because it's such a tough life.

CRAWFORD

It's a divided life, between the daily world and the writing.

CONROY

Most writers have to have a day gig. That makes it tough. Writing is extremely hard work, but you can't count on it to pay the bills.

CRAWFORD

You've said that rejection is very difficult. What sort of rejection did you face?

CONROY

Stop-Time received praise everywhere, from the *New York Review of Books* to the *Chattanooga Bee*. The reviews were just unbelievable, and 98 percent of them were completely stupid. And I thought, Okay, Frank, remember this, remember that they don't know what they're talking about, because some day you're going to get a bad review, and I did, finally. I rely on the opinion of a few friends who are very good readers. If Jim Salter tells me something is good, I believe it. When somebody says,

Oh, that's no good, you feel the whole castle shaking, because you don't know what you're doing. You can't prove it. But over time you learn that the reviews don't mean a great deal.

CRAWFORD

When you write, are you writing for your friends, and do you have a sense of writing alongside other writers?

CONROY

My metaphor for the audience is the collective consciousness. A religious person would call it God. But in a way each writer writes for him- or herself—each writer as the universal reader, each writer explicating consciousness and putting onto the page what it is to be alive—as affirmation of existence. It's tricky, though, because there is the danger of self-deception, and one thing each writer has in common with other writers is the awareness of performing at the whim of the muse.

CRAWFORD

What inspired *Body and Soul?*

CONROY

Bob Stone and I were in Key West visiting Sam Lawrence, who was one of the great entrepreneurial literary editors of the second half of the twentieth century. He said something about how it was time for me to make some money. I thought he was joking. But he said, I want you to do a novel, and I'll publish it, and pay you a lot of money. Nobody had ever said that to me. I went home, and I realized that floating around in my mind for some time had been the idea of a novel less patently autobiographical, not a memoir, but a novel, and it would be about music. I started it and very quickly knew it was going to be a challenge but that it was going to be good.

CRAWFORD

What was the challenge?

CONROY

Well, music is very tough to write about. There are very few novels about music because the experience of music is hard to convey in words. Musicians who've read the book tell me they adore it. Writing it completely took me over for about three years and was like living in two worlds. The book became a reality more immediate than the ordinary world.

CRAWFORD

You relied on an ability to concentrate hard enough to get to a place where things happened on the page.

CONROY

You have to concentrate to the utmost of your ability. The extreme concentration opens a door that allows you to tap parts of yourself that you don't ordinarily.

CRAWFORD

And then it comes.

CONROY

I rarely talk about my own work except when I'm trying to get a student to understand how to call on instinct to move a story forward. You don't do it by plan. At one point in *Body and Soul* I wanted the main character, Claude, to go up to Lexington Avenue, where his mother was giving a speech. I followed him, and he wouldn't go where I wanted. He turned. He went into an automat, and I hadn't the faintest idea what would happen, but the scene turned out to be crucial. It's the moment the book turns from jazz to blues.

CRAWFORD

Are some writers born with better instincts than others?

CONROY

I don't believe in the natural writer. I believe in the natural reader who gradually begins to write. You can't write independent of literature, so you read, you read, you read, you read, you read, and then you begin to write. A lot of it is mysterious. I see writing from many super-bright people, IQs of 165, and I have to say, smarts doesn't necessarily get you anywhere with writing. High intellect may affect what you write about, but finally what makes writing stand out is not about intellect. I've known three people whom I would call astrally intelligent—and all three of them tried to write, and they couldn't.

CRAWFORD

Why not?

CONROY

They wanted to know too much. They were too afraid of not knowing. Too afraid of surrendering and keeping the faith in a process that they can't intellectually explicate.

CRAWFORD

What makes good narrative?

CONROY

Good narrative puts the reader and writer in a position of equality. The text forms a bridge between two imaginations. A challenging narrative must nonetheless be welcoming to the reader. A good narrative has drive. But I don't care for theory, and we don't spend any time here on theory. Talking about writing is one thing, and writing is another. On the page you have to teach the reader how to read you. I once had a student who couldn't write her way out of a paper bag. And then she wrote an amazing story, and *The Atlantic* published it, and I said, What happened? And she said, Back then, it was all in my head. I knew instantly what she meant, because it's not supposed to be in your head; it's supposed to open between you and the reader.

CRAWFORD

Do you get stuck when you're writing?

CONROY

All the time! You have to write until you get in trouble and then stop and figure out how to get out of trouble. If I get stuck, I just put the problem out of my mind and do other things, and then the problem resolves itself. Often I don't know that it's resolved until I go back to the work.

CRAWFORD

What sort of problems do you encounter?

CONROY

Not knowing where to go. Sometimes I have to wait to know instinctively which of many possible paths to take.

CRAWFORD

Can *that* be taught?

CONROY

No. But a novel is made of what's discovered in the act of writing it. So I tell students not to be spooked when they get stuck. It's good, it has to happen.

CRAWFORD

Yet it's possible to write instinctively and end up with a mess. So you have to pay attention to narrative continuity, and form ...

CONROY

Of course. But after a while you take them for granted because you've absorbed the forms from reading.

CRAWFORD

I want to ask you about a scene. The boy in *Stop-Time* is lying on his tummy in the kennel with the dogs, and a Tinkerbell figure appears:

> She is five or six inches tall.... Instantly I recognize she is the embodiment of all beauty. Her smile becomes more radiant, dazzling me. She is pleased by my recognition of her. My brain spins! It is all true! There is beauty beyond what I can imagine! There is a force somewhere that knows of my uniqueness and has judged me deserving, revealing itself....
>
> "Don't worry," she says. "We know you. We've been watching you. You're a good boy." ...
>
> "When will I see you again?"
>
> "When the time is right."
>
> "Goodbye." I send my voice into the darkness. "Goodbye."

CONROY

Yeah, yeah, it was amazing. It happened.

CRAWFORD

If there's such a thing as a muse, that's got to be yours telling you she's there.

CONROY

(Smiling.) I don't know. It's a mystery. I knew she wasn't real, but she felt real.

CRAWFORD

Perhaps it was your own heart, taking care of you.

CONROY

Probably.

CRAWFORD

There's the myth among jazz musicians that the quality of the music is in direct proportion to the degree of pain they've suffered.

CONROY

Right, and I don't believe that for a moment. Obviously, people have expressed their pain through art, but pain is not an exclusive source of art. There's a stronger argument for joy than pain. Simply being alive is an occasion worthy of expression, and pleasure.

CRAWFORD

One tends the gift well, or not. One finds one's way to the gift, or not.

CONROY

There are people who are disappointed that I didn't write more. I've felt that.

CRAWFORD

Do you regret not writing more?

CONROY

I do. There are a dozen books I might have written. But that's the way it is. So I didn't write ten books, like Updike, who's just a little bit older than me, and he's got, what, fifty-two books? Something like that. I don't obsess about the books I might have written. I'm happy having written two books that might last. One, if it lasts, is a victory.

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