

# 2016 FYRE Essay Contest

*The Water Is Wide* by Pat Conroy

At orientation, we introduced you to our common reading with a passage about a moment when Pat Conroy's students are writing. Conroy's essay prompt proves to be trickier than he expected for *everybody*: he remembers that he "asked the kids to write a paper briefly describing themselves, telling me everything about themselves that they felt was important, what they liked about themselves and what they didn't like" (27). In some ways, the rest of the book traces Conroy's response to watching his students work on their papers. "By not being able to tell me anything about themselves," he concludes at this painful moment, "they were telling me everything" (27). As the year rolls on, however, he realizes that these students do have many stories to tell. Part of what "Mr. Conrack" has to learn is not just how to teach his students to tell their stories but also—and importantly—how to listen. Conroy's snap decision to ask his students to put pen to paper that first day shapes many more choices he makes about his first few weeks and months at Yamacraw.

Conroy is not the only person to make important choices. In fact, some of the most memorable episodes in *The Water Is Wide* recall decision-making moments when other people express their sense of purpose. Like Pat Conroy, Bernie Schein has to decide what to do in the wake of Dr. King's death. Mrs. Edna Graves has to decide if the children can leave home and go to Beaufort for Halloween and eventually to Washington, D.C. Dr. Piedmont and Mr. Bennington have to decide what to do with Yamacraw and finally with Conroy. Cindy, Ethel, Lincoln, Saul, and all the other students have to decide, on countless occasions, how to trust Conroy and how to teach him about the world they know on Yamacraw Island.

**For the essay contest, we'd like to read your stories about decision-making moments that reveal what your sense of purpose is and how you claim it.** While your essay can discuss a decision that a person makes in *The Water Is Wide*, it should use the text as a brief starting point before you turn to your own life and your own stories. So, feel free to begin with a passage that inspired, frustrated, or moved you—and connect it to a decision you have made in your life. Be sure to explain how and why this particular moment has become so meaningful to you. **Your essay should be between 500 and 800 words.** We know you can't tell us *everything* about yourselves, but we do hope to learn about some of your most powerful stories.

**Essay Submissions are due to [lbessent@uscb.edu](mailto:lbessent@uscb.edu) no later than 5:00 PM on Friday, January 20th 2017.** The contest winner will be invited to submit the essay for Student Research and Scholarship Day in April 2017.