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## Hard, Hard Religion: Interracial Faith in the Poor South

Carol Walker Jordan

*Retired Writer and Educational Consultant*

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**Smoke Signals From Samarcand: The 1931 Reform School Fire and Its Aftermath.** Barbara Bennett. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018. ISBN 978-1-61117-860-9 (hardcover); 978-1-61117-631-6 (Ebook). 144 p. \$24.99

Barbara Bennett's research entices the reader to pursue this work as a story that needed to be told. We learn that smoke signals was a call for help. Was setting fire to buildings in this North Carolina juvenile training school for girls under the care of the State of North Carolina a crime punishable by life in prison or was it justified as a cry for help? In this small juvenile training center for girls in Eastern North Carolina, Bennett documents the actions of the residents who suffered chronic abuse and mistreatment at the hands of the staff and teachers.

From floggings, starvation, imprisonment in locked rooms and medical sterilization, the girls at Samarcand Manor experienced abuses beyond imagination today. Through Bennett's craft of writing and research, she tells a story that is captivating and painful to read. A place where evil overcame goals of rehabilitation led the unfortunate girls to attempt to escape the Manor. Their thinking in rebelling was that the escape might allow them to return to their homes. The fifteen girls meet a terrible end in the battle of wit and might that ensued.

Bennett reveals to us "In North Carolina in the 1930s, North Carolina was in the throes of a powerful eugenics movement. (Part One, One) At the time, influential members of society believed one must be strong, intelligent, economically and genetically superior if they are to bear and produce children." Bennett points to theories proposed by "Winston Churchill, Theodore Roosevelt, Margaret Sanger, H. G. Wells and H. L. Mencken, 'who once suggested that the U.S. government pay one thousand dollars each to all Americans deemed "undesirable if they would be voluntarily sterilized"' (Part One, One).

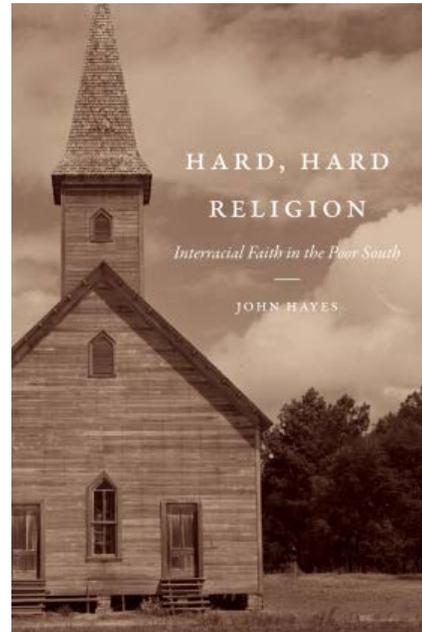
This research allows the reader to meet the fifteen accused girls residing at Samarcand Manor. Bennett's interviews reveal the prejudice, bias, power and evil resident in the minds of the public and government authorities promoting "natural selection". As a case study, it reveals how the science of eugenics could be visited upon the powerless and weakest of society. How did the state of North Carolina employ staff who lied to a girl that she needed an appendectomy so that a sterilization might be performed? Read the stories and remember the power we gain from the knowledge of the uses of history. Never again, we say.

This question and more are examined by Bennett's research and can lead anyone to a deeper understanding of our past as a society and those who became our victims. A great read and a helpful awakening to women's issues and to our past in North Carolina.

Recommended for public libraries, school libraries, academic libraries and women's studies classes.

*Carol Walker Jordan*  
Retired Writer and Educational Consultant

**Hard, Hard Religion: Interracial Faith in the Poor South.** John Hayes. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. ISBN 978-1-4696-3532-3 (pbk. - \$27.95); 978-1-4696-3531-6 (hardcover - \$90.00); 978-1-4696-3533-0 (Ebook - \$19.99). 250 p.



Beginning with a serious determination to skim Hayes' 238 page book and get a review ready for the SELn spring issue, I soon changed my approach. Each and every page revealed another fascinating anecdote along the trail Hayes was leading me, it became impossible to simply skim his words.

Hayes' ability to show how disenfranchised black and white people living in poverty and discrimination in the South in the years before World War II and the Civil Rights movement shared commonalities and developed a folk religion to sustain themselves. Christianity in its appeal to those who had risen above the levels of poverty and begun to climb into the middle class was not appealing to black and white people trapped in poverty and held down by prejudice and no opportunity to move beyond their circumstances.

The last paragraph of John Hayes' book, gives us a look at "one of folk Christianity's practitioners—a farm laborer who coined the evocative phrase "hard, hard religion". The laborer said, "the snake came, and Adam and Eve couldn't stay away from the snake, it got to them, that's what happened, it just got to them. Every day there's a snake in our lives, every day, I tell you...There's nothing so bad on the outside, that it don't have its equal on the inside...I'm

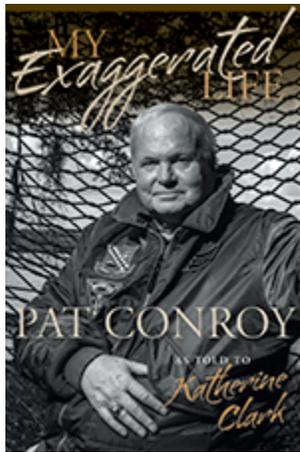
just a bad soul, trying to get as good as possible, before I'm called". (p. 196)

John Hayes is an excellent story teller and a painter of deep feelings and emotions through his words and phrases. For a look into the various ways folk Christianity adapted the rituals and practices of traditional Christian faith, Hayes' research reveals distinct adaptations in music, preaching, funerals, burials and graveyards.

A conclusion chapter, notes, bibliography and index provide a student or faculty member with excellent resources to investigate. There are black and white illustrations to illuminate the narrative. Recommended for public libraries, academic libraries and church and seminary libraries.

*Carol Walker Jordan*  
Retired Writer and Educational Consultant

**My Exaggerated Life.** Pat Conroy as told to Katherine Clark. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018. ISBN 978-1-161117-907-1 (hardcover - \$29.99); 978-1-61117-908-8 (Ebook - \$19.99). 352 p.



*My Exaggerated Life* is the product of a special collaboration between the great American author, Pat Conroy, and oral biographer Katherine Clark, who recorded hundreds of hours of conversations with Conroy before he passed away in 2016. No subject was off limits including aspects of his tumultuous life he had never revealed." (Suzanne Axland, Marketing Director, USC Press) This revelation by Ms. Axland piqued my curiosity and I realized I was to experience the work of an oral biographer, possibly my first venture into an oral biographer's world

where conversation gave revelations unexperienced in other types of biographies.

Certainly I did not expect the revelations that an oral biography could produce until I opened the book and on page 1, I was confronted with the realism of Conroy's words, "I had the greatest childhood on earth, because Santini beat the shit out of me, then the Citadel beat the shit out of me. So I was ready for life. The Great Santini taught me everything I needed to know about how the world would treat me. He taught me everything life could hurt me with, crush me with, throw at me; there were no surprises that life got to throw at me because I'd grown up with the Great Santini." (p. 1). Conroy confides further to Clark, "and if that wasn't enough I was sent to the Citadel, where I got my nose rubbed in shit for four straight years". (p.1). Clark revealed that Conroy was a person who liked to talk about himself. He was someone who would call a friend and talk for one to two hours and had no trouble keeping the conversation going. For her, his style of revealing his thoughts, past experiences and his love of story telling, provided "over 200 hours of conversations which she recorded to provide this oral biography".

Clark organized her interviews and Conroy's conversations into significant places where Conroy lived and worked (intertwining significant life events and people who were critical to his life story) : Beaufort, SC, (1967-1973), Atlanta (1973-1981), Rome (1981-1988) , San Francisco (1988-1992), Fripp Island, and Beaufort, SC, (1992-2016), where he died in 2016.

To encourage readers of this oral biography, I can promise one will have an unforgettable experience reading and feeling Conroy's words. My second paragraph in which I reveal his words: "I had the greatest childhood on earth..." (p.1) sets the tone for the following 313 pages. Expect to find that Bronwen Dickey's words are perfect to describe Pat Conroy, as "big-hearted, wickedly funny, and completely unforgettable, even when his demons threatened to get the better of him. No one was more generous toward other writers, or more encouraging to those who sought his counsel. No one better understood the power of stories to save lives. A great light went out on March 4, 2016 but Katherine Clark has done the world a profound service by rekindling it in these pages." (Bronwen Dickey press reviewer)

Recommended for public, academic and liberal studies libraries. 2018

*Carol Walker Jordan*  
Retired Writer and Educational Consultant