



A conversation with award-winning, bestselling author Rick Bragg



By Mark Shaffer

"In a south that no longer seems to remember its heart, our food may be the best part left. It is the opposite of the bloody past, the doomed ideals, and our still-divisive, modern day culture; it is a thing that binds us more than it shoves us apart, from each other and the rest of the world."

-Rick Bragg, *The Best Cook in the World*

Margaret Bragg answers the phone with a simple "Hello" drenched in an Appalachian accent as thick and sweet as cane syrup.

"Is Mr. Bragg available?"

"Which one?"

"Rick, ma'am."

"He's downstairs," she says. "You're gonna have to hold on. You're just gonna have to *hold on, now*."

She delivers the last line with a slight sense of urgency. And while I'm certain that, like my own mother, this is rooted in a simple lack of faith in modern communications technology, it has all the weight of sage advice for living in this modern world. And if anyone has a recipe for living life, it's the Best Cook in the World.

Rick Bragg shares his mother's beguiling drawl and if you pay attention, you can hear that accent in your head when you read the words he writes about his momma:

"She spiked collard greens with cane sugar and hot pepper for old men who fought the Hun on the Hindenburg Line, and simmered chicken and dumplings for mill workers with cotton lint still stuck in their hair. She fried thin apple pies in white butter and cinnamon for pretty young women with bus tickets out of this one-horse town, and baked sweet-potato cobbler for the grimy pipe fitters and dusty bricklayers they left behind. "

The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and bestselling author comes to Beaufort in early November to take part in the Pat Conroy Literary Festival. Bragg's been compared to his old friend more than once, lofty praise for any writer. But I'm guessing if you said that to his face, he'd blush and change the subject. The slightly eerie fact remains that while speaking to him via a highly reliable relic of a bygone era called a "landline," it occurs to me that the similarities to Pat didn't end at the bottom of a page.

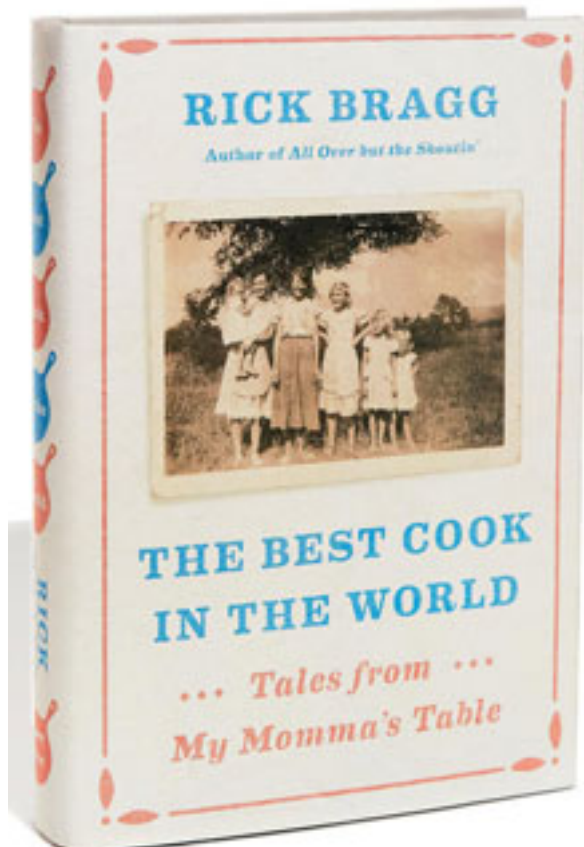
Mark Shaffer: How'd you get involved in the festival?

Rick Bragg: After Pat passed I did some memorials, around the country, around the south, of course. And I would see [Pat's wife] Cassandra [King], and other folks. It's funny. Pat was one of the most loving people in the world, but he always wasn't the nicest talker to people who were close to him, you know, he'd let you have it this way in which you knew he was just pushing your buttons, and pulling your strings. And there were all these people, saying all these sweet and loving things about him, and I thought to myself, "I'll bet somewhere he is sitting up there just laughing out loud." And when the Conroy Institute (whether they call it that or not) - when it became a reality, you know, it was just nice to be asked.

I live about as far from the South Carolina Lowcountry as you can get, both horizontally and vertically. We're here in the mountains of northeast Alabama, and that is where Cassandra has roots and ties. You know, like a lot of writers, Pat would reach out to me no matter where I lived, and he would give me one of those Pat Conroy messages that was part – mostly - pep talk, and partly castigation, you know, for something that you weren't even sure if you did wrong.

MS: That was Pat's sense of humor.

RB: Yeah, it was always, "It's up to me to keep this dying friendship alive." Later I learned he did



www.patcooxyliteraryfestival.org