the published text without their becoming repetitious or indistinct is itself an astonishing feat. A. E. Hotchner, who was with Hemingway during that summer of 1959, recently assured me that Hemingway took nary a note following each faena. As late as 1959, the “rat trap” Hemingway memory was intact. Certainly 1960 and 1961 were the years of Hemingway’s decline. But perhaps we should now consider the postwar years as the late flowering of Ernest Hemingway.

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The recent nomination of Peter Conn’s authoritative volume for a National Book Critic’s Circle Award only confirmed what I already knew: This is one fine book about one fascinating, heroic, and strangely neglected American writer. For starters, detailed biographies of writers like Pearl S. Buck, who have been almost compulsively ignored, are challenging gambles for literary scholars, even when, as with Pearl (which is how Conn refers to his subject throughout the book), the case to be made for a writer’s stature is surprisingly strong and perhaps unassailable. Our profession, I believe, should be profoundly grateful that Conn decided a number of years ago to invest the time and resources into what turns out to be a convincing recovery of Pearl S. Buck. Moreover, Conn suggests a variety of ways that Buck could, and should, be studied by future scholars, some of which I will elaborate at the end of this essay. My overall sense of the subject of Conn’s book echoes what I remember Carl Bode declaring in his Penguin introduction to Horatio Alger’s boys’ stories: Pearl S. Buck, you look good to me.

All of this may come as a genuine surprise to many Americanists, and so I will summarize here some of the reasoning behind Conn’s, and my own, claim that Buck is worthy of some long-overdue scholarly attention. Most critics know, of course, the basic information about Buck’s career: her childhood spent in China with missionary parents, which provided the means for her fluency and great learning in Chinese literature, culture, and history; her monumental success with the novel The Good Earth (1931), which won the Pulitzer Prize and became one of the most famous and beloved American novels of the century; her receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938; and, finally, the by-now-conventional professional assessment of all of these matters—that Buck was a sloppy and often mediocre writer who did not deserve the Nobel Prize, the proof for which is that none of her books has stood the “test of time.”

Tellingly, Conn begins his narrative in a personal confessional style, admitting that, when he first became interested in Buck, “I could have written everything I knew about [her] on a three-by-five index card” (xi), which is roughly what
I have sketched out above. However, as Conn goes on to argue throughout the course of the book, and, in particular, in the book’s excellent and succinct preface, Buck’s “disappearance from the American cultural scene was not self-explanatory” (xii). After all, she gained the admiration of and helped to motivate such diverse public figures as John Hersey, Roy Wilkins, Sinclair Lewis, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, James Michener, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Langston Hughes, and W. E. B. DuBois. She practically “invented China” for two generations of Americans and other westerners (xiv). She came to literary maturity as “a minority person” in a foreign country, a fact that is “almost [unique] among white American writers” and certainly is not the case for any “other American writer of equivalent significance” (xiv, 75). Moreover, upon their publication, her books were frequently praised by the most eminent literary critics of the day; at times she was compared favorably with the likes of Leo Tolstoy and others.

Conn thoroughly demonstrates that Buck was a powerful cultural voice reaching her zenith of influence during the most tumultuous years of the century. Conn focuses most prominently on Buck as champion of democratic equality and spokesperson for the oppressed masses worldwide. Her adoption agency, Welcome House, where Conn himself first gained an interest in his subject, is merely the most widely known of Buck’s energetic attempts at reform and activism. At various times, Buck was quite vocal in the causes of African American civil rights, anti-lynching legislation, and India’s independence from an imperialist Great Britain. She publicly attacked racist doctrines and nuclear weaponry. After her father’s death in 1931, Buck’s pointed comments about the hypocrisy of Protestant missionaries in China initiated a widely publicized debate throughout much of the North American church community regarding the viability and objectives of mission work. (I should like to mention here one of the book’s highlights, Conn’s excellent exposition of Chinese history during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, particularly his careful attention in the opening chapter to the lives of American missionaries to China.)

Later, at a time when virtually no white Americans were saying anything about it, Buck openly deplored the United States Government’s internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Throughout the war years, she castigated the racist views of Winston Churchill and raised a ruckus in 1943 by suggesting that America’s “alliance with the British empire was tantamount to ‘fascism’” (257). Buck’s compassion for the “fatherless, mixed-race” children of American servicemen and Asian women, and her coining of the term Amerasian for these children who were condemned by both the East and the West, resulted in the beginnings of social movements to aid these forlorn and forgotten offspring (313). As James Michener said about his friend and long-time Pennsylvania neighbor: “I knew Pearl well . . . and boy, she would take on anybody. She was infinitely more brave than I was. . . . She was a heroic woman” (314).

My summary so far helps to explain Conn’s appropriate title: this is primarily a “cultural biography,” and Buck’s place as cultural figure and, for a generation of American women, cultural icon and hero should be unquestioned. In addition to pointing out Buck’s obvious cultural significance, Conn shows why literary critics should carefully reassess her achievement as a writer. He plausibly asserts that a
number of Buck’s works, which come to well over eighty, are worthy of serious reconsideration by Americanists; he even provides a list (The Exile [1936], Fighting Angel [1936], My Several Worlds [1954], The Mother [1934], First Wife and Other Stories [1933], Sons [1932], Dragon Seed [1942], Imperial Woman [1956], Kinfolk [1949], This Proud Heart [1938], and Of Men and Women [1940] [xvii]). He rightly treats The Good Earth as a distinct creation that serves as the height of Buck’s achievement, but it is clear that Conn also deeply admires (and relies upon as historical evidence for his story) the first three volumes listed, which are the biographies of Buck’s parents (The Exile and Fighting Angel, which were given special mention by the Nobel Committee) and her own autobiography (My Several Worlds).

It should be emphasized that Conn does not spend much time examining or analyzing the bulk of Buck’s fiction, and thus this volume is not a “critical biography.” Although some may disparage the general lack of discussion of most of Buck’s books (there is brief consideration of the “important” works), frankly, a more extensive look at the novels would detract from the richer “cultural” materials that inform most of Buck’s works. More usefully, Conn consistently suggests important angles from which Buck’s literary creation might be studied. For instance, Buck sometimes referred to herself as a “naturalist,” in that her characters were often overwhelmed by circumstances beyond their control (220), and her initial reaction to the news of the Nobel Prize was, “it should have gone to Dreiser” (208).

Buck’s works should almost certainly be given sustained attention by feminist critics. It is no exaggeration to say that, for a generation of American women, Buck was possibly the most admired author; not surprisingly, her novels often portray strong female characters who sometimes rise to political or cultural power. Her novel Dragon Seed, based on the infamous rape of Nanking by the Japanese Army in 1937, elaborately develops the motif of rape while championing the plight of common women caught up in such horrific events (255–56); This Proud Heart is one of the only novels by a major American writer that depicts an American woman of true genius. Moreover, Buck’s prose essays on gender issues were once so highly valued that she was compared favorably with Virginia Woolf (248), and her near-unanimous dismissal by the white male elites of the post-war literary establishment (exemplified by William Faulkner’s notorious reference to her in a letter written in 1950 as “Mrs. Chinahand Buck” [210]) is quite suggestive for those interested in canon-construction and literary institutions.

Of course, with today’s great interest in issues of representation, particularly with regard to ethnic and racial Others, Buck’s depiction of Asia and her status as a scholarly Sinologist should become the object of serious study, especially for those interested in post-colonial theory. For comparativists, the way that Buck developed and utilized Chinese forms and genres could prove fertile ground. For textual editors and bibliographers, the work has hardly even begun, although Conn’s outstanding research has churned up the basic sources and thereby provided the treasure map to countless invaluable texts, almost none of which are now in print.

These are merely the beginnings of what may become a renaissance in Pearl S. Buck as a major (or at least a minor) American writer. More generally, a
thorough reconsideration of Buck’s place in American literature will focus on the nature of American literature itself. As William Spengemann and numerous others since have claimed, American literature as a category of study has itself been very limiting. Pearl S. Buck’s exclusion, not only from the canon, but in effect from all literature classrooms, is a quintessential example of the limits of American literary study. Ostensibly, her novels simply “do not fit” what Americans have historically done: her most important works are not about Americans, its society, geography, culture, and so on. Realistically, it is difficult to envision how one might include a Buck novel in a survey course; however, some of her books should be considered for advanced and graduate courses. In a contemporary climate in which American literature is being so thoroughly redefined, Buck would seem to be the perfect candidate for literary rescue.

Every once in a while, people who are themselves writers will read a book and fervently wish that they could have been the one with the original inspiration and the long-term commitment to bring it into print. Almost from beginning to end, I felt this way about Conn’s book. One cold December night, I wandered among second-hand bookstores in Georgetown trying to locate and purchase several of Buck’s worn-out volumes: Conn made me want actually to read some of Buck’s works, which strikes me as one of the ultimate goals of any literary biography. My subsequent reading of a dog-eared Fighting Angel, Buck’s profoundly moving and elegantly written biography of her father, which Conn calls a “monument to the story of Protestant evangelism in China” (188), convinced me that she has a great deal to offer a contemporary audience. As a result, and by way of highly recommending this book, I repeat in the manner of Carl Bode what I said above: Pearl S. Buck, you look good to me. And so do you, Peter Conn.

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Taken together, recent accretions to the scholarship on Katherine Anne Porter tantalizingly suggest the possibility that this author is on her way to being considered a “major” Modernist. Volumes such as Thomas F. Walsh’s Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico: The Illusion of Eden (1992), Robert Brinkmeyer’s Katherine Anne Porter’s Artistic Development: Primitivism, Traditionalism, Totalitarianism (1995), Ruth M. Alvarez’s The Uncollected Early Prose of Katherine Anne Porter (1993), and Janis Stout’s Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times (1995) demonstrate that solid scholarly work in at least three categories—traditional criticism, textual editing, and biography—can assist in presenting us with a more complete picture of Porter’s eminently literary life.