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Meet the 2011 Panelists (Part Two)

By Charles S. Shields

The following is the second in a TBC series highlighting some of the experts coming to the [Compleat Biographer Conference](#), on May 21 in Washington, D.C., and what they'll be sharing.

Kate Buford

"Using Social Networking"

Kate Buford is the author of *Burt Lancaster: An American Life* (Knopf, 2000) and *Native American Son: The Life and Sporting Legend of Jim Thorpe* (Knopf, 2010).

You didn't play sports growing up, but you wrote the biography of a sports legend. Did you let instinct lead you to your subject?

I didn't want to write another movie-based book, as Lancaster was so definitive and I didn't want to get typecast as a movie writer. I grew up in California in a sports-struck family. In looking for the next book subject, I realized that sports is now the common denominator of our time. The language, metaphors, and stars of sports are now mainstream culture, and I wanted to write about where it all began—with Jim Thorpe, the first international sports celebrity and the greatest multi-sport athlete of modern times. Burt Lancaster played Thorpe in *Jim Thorpe—All American*, the 1951 Warner Brothers bio-pic.

I sense that you're attracted to virility in your subjects? Why?

Virility? A therapist would say it's my father, of course. Seriously, though, I like to write about subjects—the movies and sports—that are usually thought of as part of "popular" culture but that I would argue are part of mainstream culture too. I wanted to contextualize both Lancaster and Thorpe with the same care one would give a politician, artist, inventor, military leader, founding father, etc.

You refer to a period of your life when you were a writer but not an author. What's the difference?

There are many writers and comparatively few authors. One can write and never publish and still be a writer. I meant to convey that the disposition to be a writer in my case manifested itself well before I actually wrote anything. I structured my life around stocking up on what I considered essential experiences at the time. I felt that I had to get these items on my life-list checked off first. Once my babies were born, the writing impulse kicked in. Fifteen years later I signed my first book contract with Knopf.