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.