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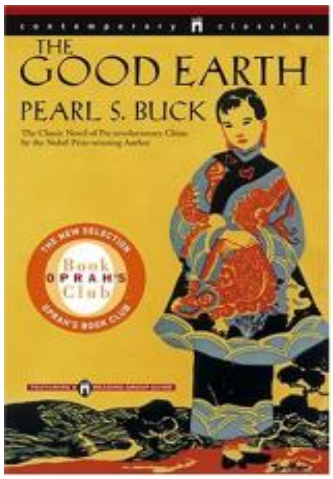
The Good Earth

by Pearl S. Buck



About the Book

Pearl S. Buck's epic Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of a China that was.

Though more than sixty years have passed since this remarkable novel won the Pulitzer Prize, it has retained its popularity and become one of the great modern classics. "I can only write what I know, and I know nothing but China, having always lived there," wrote Pearl Buck. In **The Good Earth** she presents a graphic view of a China when the last emperor reigned and the vast political and social upheavals of the twentieth century were but distant rumblings for the ordinary people. This moving, classic story of the honest farmer Wang Lung and his selfless wife O-lan is must reading for those who would fully appreciate the sweeping changes that have occurred in the lives of the Chinese people during this century.

Nobel Prize winner Pearl S. Buck traces the whole cycle of life: its terrors, its passions, its ambitions and rewards. Her brilliant novel -- beloved by millions of readers -- is a universal tale of the destiny of man.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel begins with Wang Lung's expectation of rain, the daily boiling of water for his father, and his bathing for his wedding. What might this water imagery foreshadow?

2. Why does Wang Lung feel compelled to purchase the rice field from the House of Hwang? Why does he at first regret it?

3. "And so this parcel of land became to Wang Lung a sign and a symbol." What does the author mean by this?

4. Wang Lung considers the birth of his daughter to be a bad omen. How does he come to regard this girl, who grows up to become a fool?

5. As the family works and begs in the city, what do they think of the foreigners they encounter? What purpose does the author serve in including these descriptions?

6. The abundance of food in the city contrasts with the characters impoverished lives. Discuss the emotionally complex relationship Wang Lung develops with the city.

7. The poor laborers in the city lack knowledge even of what they look like, a fact illustrated by the man who mocks himself in a mirror. How does a new self-awareness come to manifest itself?

8. When Wang Lung becomes swept up with the mob and enters the rich man's house, is the gold he receives there a curse or a blessing? Do you feel any pity for the rich man? What do you think the author intended you to feel?

9. After O-lan steals the jewels, do they function as a bad omen or good luck? Why does O-lan want to keep the two pearls? Why is Wang Lung so astonished by this? What do the pearls signify?

10. As O-lan dies, she bemoans her lack of beauty and says she is too ugly to be loved. Wang Lung feels guilty, but still cannot love her as he did Lotus. Neither woman can control destiny. Lotus was an orphan who had been sold into prostitution because she was beautiful, and O-lan had been sold as a kitchen slave because she was plain. For whom do you feel sympathy? Why?

11. Toward the end of the novel we encounter the belief that things will change "when the poor become too poor and the rich are too rich." Discuss the ambivalence of this statement -- a mixture of both hope and despair -- and how it reflects upon the whole of **The Good Earth**.

12. Pearl Buck wrote a first-person novel from the point of view of a Chinese man, which was controversial because she was of a different culture. What are some of the challenges of this undertaking? How might this book have been different had it been written by a Chinese person? Compare Buck's novel to other books written by authors striving to transcend culture or gender (e.g.: Arthur Golden's **Memoirs of a Geisha**, James Baldwin's **Giovanni's Room**, Wally Lamb's **She's Come Undone)**.

Author Bio

Pearl Comfort Sydenstricker was born on June 26, 1892 in the West Virginia home of her grandmother. She was born the fourth of seven children to Caroline and Absalom, two Presbyterian missionaries, who were home from China. The family quickly returned to their home in Chinkiang, China three months after Pearls birth. Pearl grew up among the Chinese peasants in a small farming community. Her first language was Chinese, she grew up with the customs and traditions of the Chinese. As she grew her mother and

her teacher taught her English.

In 1910, Pearl returned to the United States to earn a degree at Randolph-Macon Womens College in Lynchburg, Virginia. She studied philosophy and was very active in the student government. She was elected class president and was a Phi Beta Kappa. After her graduation in 1914, she stayed at Randolph-Macon to teach psychology. After one semester she returned to China to assist her ill mother.

Pearl married John Lossing Buck, an agricultural missionary, in China on May 13, 1917. The couple led a very unhappy life together. In 1921, Pearl gave birth to a daughter, Carol, who was mentally disabled with a disease called PKU. Pearl decided to return to the States and place her in a full-time care facility in Vineland, New Jersey. Because of a tumor found in Pearl's uterus during delivery, she underwent a hysterectomy.

From 1920-1933, the Bucks lived in Nanking on the campus of the university where they both taught. Pearl published her first work in 1923, a nonfiction article for Atlantic magazine titled "In China too." In 1925, while studying at Cornell University, she wrote an article titled "A Chinese Woman Speaks" which would later be the impetus for her first novel EAST WIND, WEST WIND, published by the John Day Company in 1930. John Days publisher Richard Walsh took an immediate liking to Pearl and her work. This was to be the start of a long prosperous writing career in which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for THE GOOD EARTH and became the first American woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Pearl Buck divorced her husband in 1935 after falling in love with Walsh. The couple moved into an estate in Bucks County, Pennsylvania shortly after their marriage. Pearl and Richard lived at Green Hills Farm with their six adopted children. It was at this residence that she would write over 100 works before her death in 1973.

Critical Praise

"One need never have lived in China or know anything about the Chinese to understand it or respond to its appeal."

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