



MERIDEL LE SUEUR



*Sustaining the Ground
of Literary Reputation*

Linda Ray Pratt

THIRTY YEARS OF RECOVERY SCHOLARSHIP have brought to light many writers—especially women and minority authors—who were lost from view. Some never had a significant literary reputation, while others were well known in their day but then disappeared from history after a few years in the sun. This recovery work has taught us many lessons about the vagaries of literary reputation and “cultural memory.”¹ Some of these authors bumped up against the color lines, glass ceilings, or ideological conflicts that make it difficult for writers out of the mainstream to acquire the audiences, publishers, and reviews that are necessary for ongoing literary reputation. Others, such as prolific nineteenth-century novelist Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth, were best sellers in their day. For a time their careers flourished, supported with an audience, publishers, and notices in the press, but fame and literary reputation proved ephemeral when literary fashions changed or the authors stopped publishing. Still others, like Kate Chopin (1850–1904), were too controversial for their era, but the times and the feminist movement caught up with their sense of subject and they became important writers to later generations. A few seem securely institutionalized within the “canon” today, though the canon is itself an endangered species.

Meridel Le Sueur (1900–96), the daughter of crusading socialist-feminist parents, was born in Iowa, raised in the Midwest, and lived for many years in St. Paul. She began publishing short stories and journalism in the 1930s and continued to write actively until she was in her eighties. A life-long member of the Communist Party U.S.A.(CPUSA), Le Sueur always wrote from the radical margins and was most often published in left-wing periodicals or presses. Essays such as “Women on the Breadlines,” pamphlets such as “Worker Writers,” and short stories such as “Tonight is Part of the Struggle” or “Farewell My Wife and Child and All My Friends” illustrate the way radical themes and events thread their way throughout her work.

In the 1970s and 1980s Le Sueur found a new feminist audience who valued her portraits of the lives of women, a key aspect of her work that the Communist Party never encouraged. With new readers and reprints of her work in these decades, Le Sueur outlived the vitality of the party, once the mainstay of her publishing life. Whether her

FACING: Meridel Le Sueur, whose writing expressed her sense of unity with the cycles of the earth, about 1940

writing will continue to maintain its relevance and find new readers in the twenty-first century is uncertain. In an increasingly urbanized world where community is not circumscribed by the demographics of small towns and the culture of rural life, Le Sueur’s characters voice the longing to be part of something larger than the self. For many readers, the depth of her characters will transcend the particular political solutions that attracted an earlier generation. The ongoing importance of her work will ultimately depend on her wisdom, not her politics.



LITERARY HISTORY TEACHES US that the material conditions of publication and preservation are instrumental to the endurance of an artist’s reputation. If a manuscript does not get published by a press that markets effectively, and if the book does not get some kind of critical or scholarly attention, it is not likely to become known, survive to be reprinted, or even be purchased by libraries. Once out of print, books are not only unavailable to a popular audience but also are largely out of reach for classroom and other reading. Even in the digital age, it is problematic to teach books not in print.

Authors like Le Sueur, who publish mostly with small presses, are at double risk of disappearing from view. Libraries historically had standing orders for the catalogs of academic presses but not for the small ones like West End Press, Le Sueur’s frequent publisher. One way to gauge the quality of a library is to assess how many books it has purchased from small presses in the last 100 years. If a publisher goes out of business or libraries do not buy its books, a writer’s work and reputation will suffer. Access to Le Sueur’s work and scholarly interest in it are critical to sustaining her readership.

For more than 70 years, Le Sueur’s literary reputation rode up and down on the currents of political movements and fashions in criticism. The popular left-wing movements that were a critical impetus to the first period of

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Le Sueur in her signature squash-blossom necklace, photographed by John Ratzloff on her 91st birthday, February 24, 1991

her success—between 1935 and 1946—dissipated or went underground with the emergence of the Cold War. Though McCarthyism smothered her reputation in the 1950s, she still had Communist Party outlets to keep her work alive. In the Twin Cities, the remnants of the party continued to have a presence, in part because of the state’s left-liberal political climate. Her five children’s books with Alfred A. Knopf (1947–54) were generally well received by readers and critics, but they did not stay in print.² Long before the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the old comrades who were once her audience were rapidly dying away.

In the 1970s, a new feminist movement evolved out of the radicalism of the civil rights and anti-war movements. When Le Sueur’s writing began to reappear in 1977, published by John Crawford’s West End Press, a new generation of readers found in her work both a radical ideology and a feminist portrait of young women coming of age in a world dominated by men who wanted to use them sexually. The often lyrical sense of female sexuality and the conflict between men and women in Le Sueur’s work that, earlier, had led some in the party to chastise her were now seen as strengths of a feminist writer.³ Literary scholars and students in the 1970s and 1980s had little understanding of the Communist Party and were less interested in Le Sueur’s evocation of the joy of solidarity among the comrades, a theme that is central to much of her writing.

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Instead, her strong women characters were praised for throwing off the oppressive men in their lives. Their lives as women and mothers resonated more with gender issues than class conflict, or, as some might say, gendered the understanding of class conflict.

In the decade after West End Press began to publish her writing, Le Sueur made many campus visits to read her work and talk about the history she had seen unfold. Like Tillie Olsen, she was a powerful personality, striking in her personal warmth and generosity with her audience. Her visit to a campus attracted new readers, got her onto the syllabus, and sold books. As the feminist movement matured, or waned, or was displaced by other movements—depending on one’s take on this subject—Le Sueur’s audience was also, inevitably, reshaped once again. By the late 1980s her portraits of women’s sexuality and motherhood were sometimes criticized as “essentialist” because of the deep biological link she made between women and their sexual and maternal identity.

Almost 20 years have passed since Le Sueur’s campus visits—and almost 15 since her death—and her literary reputation will increasingly be dependent on what stays in print and on the syllabus. In addition to the question of accessibility, changing fashions in criticism will determine how much interest readers show in her work. Will new approaches beyond “women writers on the Left” emerge to keep her work and awareness of it alive? Will the opening up of party archives in Moscow and at New York University after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 change our understanding of writers on the Left?

Those of us who value Le Sueur’s work and have helped to reclaim it would not want to see the richness of her writing summarized in a paragraph or two in that chapter of American literary history called “proletarian fiction.” Several recent studies have placed her in the context of midwestern writing.⁴ Le Sueur saw herself partly in that tradition. Many of her stories have midwestern settings, and she is best known in Minnesota and the region. Thematically, however, her work seems often more interested in the lives of women than in the lives of women in the Midwest as a distinct region.



LE SUEUR'S EARLY PUBLISHING CAREER combined pieces in prestigious literary magazines important in the development of American Modernism—such as the *Dial*, *Pagany*, *Scribner's*, and *American Mercury*—with essays in radical journals often specifically identified with the CPUSA.⁵ Though she attended to party concerns about the workers, her literary style reflected many of the ambitions of Ezra Pound's famous slogan of Modernism: "Make it new." Modernists sought a new artistic order to replace the decay of the traditions of Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic idealism. The "little magazines" of early Modernism in which she published were major outlets for these artists, who sought to change the forms, the language, and the purpose of literature. Le Sueur's imagination, mythic but not metaphysical, and the innovative forms that she used resonate with the Modernist challenge to traditional genres and values.

Throughout the 1930s she was one of a group of writers on the Left whose careers mixed party-affiliated outlets and left-liberal magazines. Along with Tillie Olsen—at that time, Tillie Lerner—she attended the 1935 Writers' Congress and, with a community of loosely associated authors that included Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes, Nathaniel West, and James T. Farrell, signed the "Call for an American Writers' Congress." Her name was often linked with women writers such as Josephine Herbst, Agnes Smedley, Zona Gale, and, for a while, Olsen, whose career also started with a few publications in prominent left-leaning magazines. In 1940 *Salute to Spring*, a collection containing some of Le Sueur's best stories, was issued by International Publishers, a press generally associated with the Communist Party. Through 1945 Le Sueur had those three essentials for

literary reputation: an audience, steady publication, and laudatory critical notice of her work.

Between 1947 and 1954, at the peak of her powers as an artist, Le Sueur published only children's literature and a variety of material in Communist Party outlets. Historian Julia Mickenburg argues convincingly that Le Sueur's children's books for Knopf were part of a larger pattern of interest in writing for young readers and not just the only thing she could do during the McCarthy years. Still, aside from these books, most of Le Sueur's writing for the next 20 years appeared in journals such as *Masses and Mainstream* and *Mainstream*, whereas before 1947, only about 20 percent of her work was published in Communist Party-aligned outlets. Furthermore, these post-World War II party journals never had the literary status of the earlier *New Masses*. Le Sueur's adult readership was largely limited to those who read party publications during "the dark of the time," as she labeled it in her 1956 story in *Masses and Mainstream*.

The second stage of her career depended largely on the recovery work of West End Press. In 1978 Crawford gave us the first edition of her novel *The Girl*, written in the 1930s, and the first edition of the novel *I Hear Men Talking* in 1984. The period between 1982 and 1984 was the high-water mark of her publication, with the anthology *Ripening* from Feminist Press in 1982, and, along with *I Hear Men Talking* in 1984, *Crusaders* from the Minnesota Historical Society Press, and the reprint of her 1945 *North Star Country* by the University of Nebraska Press. More recently the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* reprinted "Women on the Breadlines," and her short story, "Annunciation," appeared in the prestigious *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. A few other pieces have been included in collections with less circulation.

Meridel Le Sueur's Books for Children

Originally published between 1947 and 1954, these books were Le Sueur's lyrical presentations of history and biography. Out of print for decades, they were brought back in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Holy Cow! Press.

- *Little Brother of the Wilderness: The Story of Johnny Appleseed* (1947)
- *Nancy Hanks of Wilderness Road: A Story of Abraham Lincoln's Mother* (1949)
- *Sparrow Hawk* (1950; a story of a young Iowa settler and his Native friend at the time of the Black Hawk War.)
- *Chanticleer of Wilderness Road: A Story of Davey Crockett* (1951)
- *The River Road: A Story of Abraham Lincoln* (1954)





FOR NOW, LE SUEUR'S MAJOR TEXTS remain in print at prices that make library and classroom purchases possible. Many of the lesser-known works are still available from the publisher and through online sources. West End Press published new editions of *I Hear Men Talking* (2001) and *The Girl* (2006). According to Crawford, since 2006 *The Girl* has continued to sell steadily and is, overall, the press's lead seller. (He also reported that there were negotiations about movie rights to *The Girl*, but nothing has materialized.) The collections *Harvest* and *Song for My Time: Stories of the Period of Repression*, both originally published in 1977 and reprinted in subsequent years, sold well in the early years after publication. *Ripening*, the most widely distributed of her books, was reprinted in 1990 and is still available. *Salute to Spring* was reprinted in 1989 and it, too, is still available. The 3,000 paperback copies and 316 cloth of the 1984 reprint of *North Star Country* sold out, but the University of Minnesota Press picked up the title in 1998, and that edition is still in print.⁶



Since West End Press has been Le Sueur's major publisher, the visibility of her work depends heavily on its stability and ability to promote its catalog. In 2006 Crawford was thinking about archiving all of the press's titles, but new support materialized that resulted in expanded operations. Last year the press published ten new books, six by new writers, and seems secure for the foreseeable future. Crawford also reports that the current recession seems to have sparked a new interest in Le Sueur's depression-era story, "Women on the Breadlines."

University libraries in the region have substantial holdings of Le Sueur's work. The University of Minnesota lists 36 items under her name. In addition to her books, the Minnesota Historical Society has some 43 boxes of her journals, correspondence, and other manuscripts, plus some video and audio tapes. Augsburg College in Minneapolis has many books from Le Sueur's library and several miscellaneous items, including political poetry, audio tapes, and record albums. The University of Iowa has an extensive collection: 55 items representing about

40 different publications under her name. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln library has 21 entries, 14 of which are different books. The University of Kansas has 18 entries, 13 of them different works. These holdings are a solid and permanent base for future research.

Scholars continue to work on Le Sueur, but the death of Constance Coiner in 1996 cut short the life of one of the author's most dedicated critics. Three essays appeared in 2005, including Erin Obermueller's "Reading the Body in Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl*" in *Legacy, The Journal of American Women Writers*. Carolina Nuñez Puente's *Feminism and Dialogics: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Meridel Le Sueur, and Mikhail Bakhtin* in 2006 includes a chapter on the short story "Annunciation."⁷ One or two journal essays appeared each year from 2001 to 2004, and books such as Laura Hapke's *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (2001) and Alan Wald's *Exiles from a Future Time* (2002) devote significant space to her work.

In summary, the recovery work has produced a varied body of published material, most of which is still in print; this work has been collected in good libraries as a permanent resource for study; and some new scholarly work continues to appear. A well-received film version of *The Girl* or a new edition by a major publishing house might renew and expand audience interest in this novel.



THERE IS MUCH IN LE SUEUR'S WRITING still to explore. In addition to reading Le Sueur in terms of gender, midwestern writers, and women writers on the Left, her work should be of interest to emerging fields of study. One of these is ecocriticism. Many of her stories are set in farmland or along river banks, and her women characters often feel one with the life in the soil. Even Le Sueur's political ideology derived from her sense of our oneness with the cycles of the earth. Her recurring theme of the exploitation of the fertility and sacredness of the land parallels her view of the oppression of the capitalist system, and she often focuses the economic abuse of the land metaphorically in a male character's abuse of a woman. As we increasingly become aware of the fragility of the environment and witness the destruction of natural resources to satisfy the demands of industry, Le Sueur's treatment of the land may attract more critical attention.

Despite the rhetorical preoccupation with "race, class, and gender" in recent literary criticism, the complex structures of "class" have not received much real analysis. Now, scholars such as Joseph Entin, for an example, are

exploring the texture of class culture and working-class labor, a term no longer tied to blue-collar industrial workers. Because Le Sueur focuses on women and their world, she offers us a picture of class that gets beyond the slogans of ideology into the rich detail of experience. Her work escapes what Entin has called “a disembodied position of distance from urban blight and ‘alien’ bodies,” which undermines the “legibility of the lives of the poor” and sentimentalizes them.⁸ Le Sueur’s women characters, as we see in *The Girl*, are caught in the twin nets of class and sexual politics. They are waitresses, clerks, social workers. They run with men who long to own a farm or a gas station or a bar. At their most desperate, they are prostitutes and robbers, two “career choices” that fully embrace the selling and stealing that drive the capitalist economy, which exploits their human value and the resources of a shared earth.

The Girl is also one of a handful of American novels that treats the lives of single women in the city and the role of money and sexuality in determining their choices. Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* is the most famous tale of a naïve girl from the country who makes her accommodations with the city, but his novel is told from the outside, looking in on Carrie. *The Girl* is a first-person story. When Le Sueur wrote her novel in 1939, the majority of American women were not living and working in cities. Now they are, but there is not much literature that explores what the Girl, who remains unnamed throughout the novel, describes as “the way those in it can be together.” While the life of single women in the city is a significant theme in popular television, the pop versions focus almost exclusively on beautiful, sexually liberated characters wearing fashionable clothing. The subject of women’s lives in cities is an important one that will attract increased attention as more women from diverse populations continue to migrate to urban areas to work. *The Girl* is a starting place for this theme.

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to the latest edition of *The Girl*, I queried the traditional definitions of American Modernism and suggested the role writers such as Le Sueur could play in that redefinition.⁹ American Modernism should include works such as Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, Langston Hughes’s *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, and Le Sueur’s *The Girl*. These authors use innovative Modernist narrative techniques in representing the language of the people and the rhythms of the city. They speak with the voices of the poor and the marginalized who are so

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much a part of urban life. The bodies of their speakers are not dismembered parts, their voices not disembodied. These authors were creating and using the techniques of literary modernism to give voice to a culture they knew intimately. How would we revise our understanding of Modernism if authors classified as “proletarian writers” were invited to sit down with Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot in Hugh Kenner’s elegant parlor?

It is also time to reexamine the details of Le Sueur’s life and of that of the Communist Party beyond the sheltering accounts of family and friends. Le Sueur was a mythic thinker with a disdain for the linear narratives of history, including accounts of her life. She knew how to tell a good story, but she also knew some stories she did not tell. A great deal of Le Sueur’s biography is not yet clear. Some of us know, or think we know, things that have not yet seen print. Discussions of the CPUSA divide too sharply between those who saw it as a movement of collective idealism and those who saw it as a dangerous threat to national security. Historians continue to study and evaluate almost every aspect of the Cold War and

McCarthy years, but literary critics are often not attuned to the post-1991 revisionist history of the Communist Party and the Cold War. Le Sueur’s membership in the CPUSA was an embrace of a vision and a discipline that structured much of her life—politically, personally, and artistically. She was unquestionably one of the major literary figures in the CPUSA, but the role of its writers in the history of the party needs more study.

The wonderful thing about fine writers is that their work continues to open up to us as the scholarly questions and the political climate change. Le Sueur is a significant figure in an important part of our national literature. As long as we care about what life was like on the dissenting side of twentieth-century American history, her work will speak to us. The lasting strength of her work, however, will not finally be measured by the power of an ideology or the authenticity of her feminist vision. Le Sueur’s best work captures the aspiration and endurance of people who want their lives to be connected to a meaning outside of themselves. For some of her characters, oneness with their comrades is the transforming experience. For others, their oneness with the earth and the seasons may be the avenue to meaning. Whether it be through the body, the land, or the comrades, Le Sueur’s characters fight through the difficult times and find an integral connection to a community. They learn to be at ease with themselves by having a vision beyond themselves. The literary value of her work merits our efforts to keep alive the books and the conversation about Meridel Le Sueur. □

Notes

1. I am using Cary Nelson’s term from *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

2. Julia Mickenberg, “Communist in a Coonskin Cap? Meridel Le Sueur’s Books for Children and the Reformulation of America’s Cold War Frontier Epic,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 21 (Jan. 1997): 59–85, provides convincing detail of the critical success of these books. Holy Cow! Press of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, and then Duluth, Minnesota, reissued them between 1987 and 1991.

3. For examples, see “The Horse,” *The Girl*, or *I Hear Men Talking*. Le Sueur often repeated the story about the note from Whittaker Chambers saying that her work

was “very moving but it doesn’t organize”; see Linda Ray Pratt, “Woman Writer in the CP: The Case of Meridel Le Sueur,” *Women’s Studies* 14 (Feb. 1988): 257.

4. For example, Sara Kosiba, “The Strength of the Midwestern Proletariat: Meridel Le Sueur and the Ideal Proletarian Literature,” *Midamerica: The Yearbook of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature* 31 (2004): 80–90. Several other essays about her work have also appeared in this journal.

5. See Pratt, “Woman Writer in the CP,” 247–64, for a detailed discussion of Le Sueur’s publishing history.

6. Here and below, information about sales from e-mail correspondence: Gary H. Dunham, former director, University of Nebraska Press, to author, Mar. 15, 2007;

John Crawford, West End Press, to author, Feb. 22, 2010.

7. Puente’s book, published by the Universitat de Valencia, is available online through Google Scholar and Amazon.com but is difficult to find in libraries.

8. Joseph Entin, “Unhuman Humanity: Bodies of the Urban Poor and the Collapse of Realist Legibility,” *Novel* 34 (Summer 2001): 314.

9. See Pratt, “Introduction,” in Meridel Le Sueur, *The Girl*, 2nd rev. ed. (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 2006), xix–xx.

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