Beginning with the stock market crash of 1929 and ending with America’s entry into the Second World War, the long Depression decade was a period of immense social, economic, and political turmoil. In response, writers as various as John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, Eugene O’Neill, Langston Hughes, Pearl S. Buck, and others looked to the past to make sense of the present. In this important new study of the 1930s, the distinguished cultural historian Peter Conn traces the extensive and complex engagement with the past that characterized the imaginative writing of the decade. Moving expertly between historical events and literature, Conn includes discussions of historical novels, plays and poems, biographies and autobiographies, as well as factual and imaginary works of history. Mapping the decade’s extraordinary intellectual range with authority and flair, The American 1930s is a widely anticipated contribution to American literary studies.

For Terry

Again

For our children
Steven, David, Alison, and Jennifer

And for our grandchildren
Nolan, Olivia, Mary, Zachary, and Alex
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Appendix: Literary prizes and bestsellers

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A cultural and political timeline

1929

October 25: “Black Friday,” the beginning of the stock market crash
November: Puccini’s “Madame Butterfly” is the first opera broadcast on American radio

1930

1930 census reports a US population of 122,700,000
Sigmund Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents published in an English translation
Institute for Advanced Study established in Princeton, New Jersey
April: the first Nancy Drew mystery book, The Secret of the Old Clock, by the pseudonymous Carolyn Keene
April 6: Gandhi leads the “salt march” in violation of British law and initiates the civil disobedience movement in India
June 17: Herbert Hoover signs the Smoot–Hawley Act, imposing the highest tariffs in US history
November 4: Democrats win a majority in the House of Representatives

1931

March 3: Congressional resolution establishes “The Star Spangled Banner” as the US national anthem
March 25: arrest of nine African-American youths – the “Scottsboro Boys” – for the alleged rape of two white women
May 1: dedication of the Empire State Building, the tallest building in the world
June 1: Supreme Court, in Near v. Minnesota, prohibits prior restraint of the press and affirms the freedom of the press
A cultural and political timeline

September 18: Japan invades Manchuria

October: First nonstop flight across the Pacific Ocean, from Saishiro, Japan to Wenatchee, WA (forty-one hours)

November: opening of the first museum of American art, the Whitney Gallery, in New York City

November 24: Al Capone sentenced to eleven years in prison for income tax evasion

December: annual emigration exceeds immigration for first time in US history

1932

February 10: “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” opens at the Museum of Modern Art

March 1: kidnapping of Anne and Charles Lindbergh’s baby son

July 28: Washington DC police and US Army troops attack and disband Bonus Army

July 30: Olympic Games open in Los Angeles

November 8: Franklin Roosevelt elected President, defeating incumbent Herbert Hoover by 22,800,000 to 15,700,000 votes

December 27: opening of Radio City Music Hall, with 6,200 seats the largest movie theater in the world

1933

Carl Jung’s Modern Man in Search of a Soul published in an English translation

January 30: Adolph Hitler installed as German Chancellor

February 27: German Reichstag burns

March 4: Franklin D. Roosevelt inaugurated as President

March: Frances Perkins, appointed Secretary of Labor, is the first woman to serve in the US Cabinet

March 27: Japan withdraws from the League of Nations

May 18: Franklin Roosevelt signs legislation creating the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)

May 27: Chicago World’s Fair “Century of Progress” opens

October 21: Germany withdraws from the League of Nations

November 16: USA and USSR establish diplomatic relations

December 5: approval of the twenty-first amendment to the US Constitution repeals prohibition
Arnold Toynbee, volumes i–iii of *A Study of History*

January 1: Francis Townsend launches his Old Age Revolving Pension Plan

February 1: 2,000 taxi drivers strike in New York City

February 9: “Man at the Crossroads,” Diego Rivera’s mural in Rockefeller Center, is destroyed when Rivera refuses to eliminate a portrait of Lenin

March 24: Tydings–McDuffie Act establishes commonwealth status for the Philippines and sets a timetable for independence

May 23: Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow shot to death by police

July: Southern Tenant Farmers Union is established in Arkansas

September 19: the Soviet Union is admitted to the League of Nations

October 16: commencement of the Communist “Long March” in China

May: Works Progress Administration (WPA) formed

July 5: Franklin Roosevelt signs the National Labor Relations Act

August 14: Franklin Roosevelt signs the Social Security Act

September 8: Huey Long assassinated by Dr. Carl Weiss

September 15: promulgation of the Nuremburg racial laws in Germany

October 3: Italy invades Ethiopia

September 30: Franklin Roosevelt dedicates Boulder Dam (renamed Hoover Dam in 1947)

John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*

Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

March 7: Germany reoccupies the Rhineland

June: Mary McLeod Bethune named Director of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration, the first black woman to receive a major federal appointment

July 18: Francisco Franco leads a military rebellion against the elected government of Spain
August 1: Olympic Games open in Berlin
August: Moscow show trials begin
September: sit-down strikes, through May 1937, involve 500,000 workers
October 25: Mussolini and Hitler sign Rome–Berlin Axis agreement
November 3: Franklin Roosevelt re-elected, defeating Republican Alf Landon by 27,700,000 to 16,700,000 votes
December 7: “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” exhibition opens at the Museum of Modern Art
December 11: Edward VIII abdicates the British throne
December 12: Chiang Kai-shek taken prisoner by his own generals in Xi’an and forced to agree to a united front with Communists against the Japanese

1937

February 16: Dupont patents nylon
March 17: “Photography: 1839–1937” exhibition opens at the Museum of Modern Art, the museum’s first exhibition of photography
April 26: German planes bomb the Basque town of Guernica
May 6: German airship Hindenburg crashes at Lakehurst, New Jersey
May: Texas Democrat Martin Dies named first chairman of House Un-American Activities Committee
July 2: Amelia Earhart disappears on a round-the-world flight
July 7: Japan invades China proper
July 19: Nazi exhibition of “Degenerate Art” opens in Munich
December 12: US gunboat Panay is sunk by Japanese planes in Chinese waters

1938

January 16: Benny Goodman plays in the first jazz concert at Carnegie Hall
February: Walt Disney releases Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs
March 18: Mexican government nationalizes foreign oil concessions
June: “Superman” debuts in the first issue of Action Comics
September 29: Munich Pact between Germany and Great Britain
October 3: German occupation of Czech Sudetenland
November 9: Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass) and anti-Semitic riots in Germany
November 11: Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” released
November: nuclear fission achieved by German scientists

1939
March 2: Eugenio Pacelli elected Pope Pius XII
April 1: Franco’s forces capture Madrid: the end of the Spanish Civil War
May 2: New York Yankee first baseman Lou Gehrig ends fourteen-year, 2,130 game streak
August 2: Albert Einstein writes to Franklin Roosevelt urging US research toward the construction of an atomic bomb
August 24: Germany and the Soviet Union sign a Non-Aggression Treaty
September 1: Germany invades Poland
September 3: Britain declares war on Germany

1940
1940 census reports a US population of 131,670,000
May 10: Winston Churchill takes office as British Prime Minister
Olympic Games, scheduled for Tokyo and Helsinki, canceled
June 22: Germany invades the Soviet Union
July: German air force begins bombing “Blitz” of England
July 4: opening of the American Negro Exposition (Chicago), to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation
August 21: assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico City
September 12: discovery of the Lascaux cave paintings
September 16: USA initiates first peacetime military draft
September 27: Germany, Japan, and Italy sign the Axis (Tripartite) Pact
October 25: Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. is the first African-American promoted to the rank of general in the US Army
November 5: Franklin Roosevelt re-elected, defeating Republican Wendell Willkie by 27,300,000 to 22,300,000 votes

1941
March 17: the National Gallery of Art opens in Washington, DC
December 7: Japan attacks Pearl Harbor