

ENGL 352g: BOOKPACKING

Exploring US regional cultures through contemporary novels

Spring 2018 TuTh 9.30-10.50am VKC-104
Instructor: Andrew Chater chater@usc.edu
(Office hours - Tuesday 11am to 3pm, THH-404h)

OVERVIEW

This class is an exercise in “bookpacking,” an innovative form of literary adventure in which novels serve as portals through which to explore American regional history and culture.

Over the course of a semester, we’ll take a metaphorical journey through the key regions of the USA - from the Appalachia to the Hispanic South West, and beyond - and we’ll use one contemporary novel per region to ‘unpack’ each region’s culture, past and present.

The course promises a vibrant overview of the myriad facets of the American experience, whilst offering an important exercise in cultural empathy and understanding - all the more vital in this age of profound division.

Offered for both English and GE, the course offers a holistic approach to the humanities, combining elements of literature, history, geography, politics and social studies. If you’re interested in a course that celebrates literature with a ‘real world’ application, this course is for you.

The course is led by Andrew Chater, award-winning BBC TV historian and presenter, who is developing the ‘bookpacking’ concept with USC Dornsife as a TV series for PBS.

Please visit www.bookpackers.com for more information on the concept behind the class, and www.andrewchater.com for more information on the class instructor.

REQUIRED READING

1 - Novels

- Raymond Chandler - The Big Sleep
- Elizabeth Strout - Olive Kitteridge
- James Dickey - Deliverance
- Toni Morrison - Song of Solomon
- Truman Capote - Other Voices, Other Rooms
- Willa Cather - My Ántonia
- Leslie Marmon Silko - Ceremony
- Gish Jen - Typical American

2 - Short Story Collections

- Sandra Cisneros - Woman Hollering Creek
- E. Annie Proulx - Close Range

SECONDARY READING

A course like this is as rich as you want to make it. If you are a voracious reader, you may wish to devour more books than the minimum outlined above.

I shall touch on dozens of wonderful novels as we proceed through the course. Many of these are listed in the syllabus breakdown that follows.

Week by week, I'll upload extracts from some of these novels to Blackboard. You're not expected to read these in advance - we'll dig into them, in class, together - but they'll remain on Blackboard for the remainder of the course and you can explore them and quote from them as you see fit when you come to write your papers.

I hope these extracts inspire you to revisit these texts at full length at some point in the future. This course offers a journey through America's literary landscape, and such journeys can last a lifetime.

SYLLABUS AND SCHEDULE

Wk 1/2	Aug 21, 23, 28	Los Angeles
<p><i>The course begins in LA, the city that brings us together. We'll look at SoCal's founding myths, and ask why the Golden Land boasts such a dark literary heritage.</i></p>		
	<i>Required reading (by Aug 21)</i>	Raymond Chandler - <i>The Big Sleep</i>
	<i>Other key texts</i>	<p>Joan Didion - <i>Play It As It Lays</i> Nathanael West - <i>The Day of the Locust</i> John Fante - <i>Ask the Dust</i> Helen Hunt Jackson - <i>Ramona</i></p>
Wk 2/3	Aug 30, Sept 4, 6	New England
<p><i>Yankee New England is 'white and uptight' - or so says Maine novelist Elizabeth Strout. Is she right? We'll dig into some classic and contemporary New England novels to find out.</i></p>		
	<i>Required reading (by Aug 30)</i>	Elizabeth Strout- <i>Olive Kitteridge</i>
	<i>Other key texts</i>	<p>John Irving - <i>A Prayer for Owen Meany</i> Donna Tartt - <i>The Secret History</i> Margaret Atwood - <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> Nathaniel Hawthorne - <i>The Scarlet Letter</i></p>
Wk 4/5	Sept 11, 13, 18	Appalachian Culture
<p><i>Appalachian culture is under the spotlight in Donald Trump's America. We'll beat a trail through backwoods fiction in search of empathy and understanding.</i></p>		
	<i>Required reading (by Sept 11)</i>	James Dickey - <i>Deliverance</i>
	<i>Other key texts</i>	<p>James Fenimore Cooper - <i>Last of the Mohicans</i> Thomas Wolfe - <i>Look Homeward, Angel</i> Flannery O'Connor - <i>Wise Blood</i> Mark Twain - <i>Huckleberry Finn</i></p>
Wk 5/6	Sept 20, 25, 27	The South
<p><i>The South wrestles with the weight of its history. Truman Capote's brilliant first novel captures the contradictions of this fascinating and troubling region.</i></p>		
	<i>Required reading (by Sept 20)</i>	Truman Capote - <i>Other Voices, Other Rooms</i>
	<i>Other key texts</i>	<p>Harper Lee - <i>The Kill A Mockingbird</i> Kathryn Stockett - <i>The Help</i> Margaret Mitchell - <i>Gone With the Wind</i> Erskine Caldwell - <i>Tobacco Road</i></p>

Wk 7/8	Oct 2, 4, 9		African American Cultures
	<p><i>Song of Solomon traces the African American trajectory backwards, from 20th c. Michigan to 19th c. Virginia. It's a novel with profound contemporary relevance in this racially divided nation.</i></p>		
		Required reading (by Oct 2)	Toni Morrison - Song of Solomon
		Other key texts	<p>Toni Morrison - <i>Beloved</i> Zora Neale Hurston - <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> James Baldwin - <i>Another Country</i> Richard Wright - <i>Native Son</i> Ernest J. Gaines - <i>A Lesson Before Dying</i></p>
Wk 8/9	Oct 11, 16		The Midwest
	<p><i>"With enough time, American civilization will make the Midwest of any place" - (Garrison Keillor). We'll explore the distinctive character of heartland America through the fiction of the Plains, the Midwest and Chicago.</i></p>		
		Required reading (by Oct 11)	Willa Cather - My Àntonia
		Other key texts	<p>Marilynne Robinson - <i>Gilead</i> Sinclair Lewis - <i>Main Street</i> L. Frank Baum - <i>The Wonderful Wizard of Oz</i> Upton Sinclair - <i>The Jungle</i> Theodore Dreiser - <i>Sister Carrie</i></p>
Wk 9/10	Oct 18, 23, 25		Mexican American Culture
	<p><i>Chicano authors celebrate the traditional and folkloric, whilst acknowledging an ongoing struggle for a slice of the American Dream.</i></p>		
		Required reading (by Oct 18)	Sandra Cisneros - Woman Hollering Creek
		Other key texts	<p>Rudolfo Anaya - <i>Bless Me, Ultima</i> T.C. Boyle - <i>The Tortilla Curtain</i></p>
Wk 11/12	Oct 30, Nov 1, 6		Native American Culture
	<p><i>Leslie Marmon Silko chronicles Native American life in the desert Southwest. Her punchy and poetic work looks back to a traumatic past, and forward to the future.</i></p>		
		Required reading (by Oct 30)	Leslie Marmon Silko - Ceremony
		Other key texts	<p>Sherman Alexie - <i>Reservation Blues</i> Willa Cather - <i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i> Cormac McCarthy - <i>Blood Meridian</i></p>

Wk 12/13	Nov 8, 13, 15		The Great West
	<i>E. Annie Proulx's short stories explore contemporary lives in the Great West, a much mythologized land where the tough living conditions pit rugged individuals against the power of capital and corporations.</i>		
		Required reading (by Nov 8)	E. Annie Proulx - Close Range
		Other key texts	Wallace Stegner - <i>Angle of Repose</i> Ken Kesey - <i>Sometimes a Great Notion</i> Dashiell Hammett - <i>Red Harvest</i> Walter Van Tilburg Clark - <i>The OxBow Incident</i>
Wk 14/15	Nov 20, 27, 29		New York City / Immigrant America
	<i>New York fiction is a world in itself, and could form the basis for a whole new Backpackers course. We'll focus on two attributes of the city - as a place of financial hubris, and as the epicenter of the American 'melting pot'.</i>		
		Required reading (by Nov 20)	Gish Jen - Typical American
		Other key texts	Julia Alvarez - <i>How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents</i> Henry Roth - <i>Call It Sleep</i> Tom Wolfe - <i>The Bonfire of the Vanities</i> Ayn Rand - <i>The Fountainhead</i>

ASSIGNMENTS / ASSESSMENT

You will be graded on participation, three papers, and a Final Course Project involving original research, as follows:

- Participation: 10%
- Papers (20% x 3) = 60%
- Final Course Project: 20%
- Final Course Project Presentations: 10%

Participation

Participation is defined as:

- attendance at all sessions
- reading fully the required texts
- thoughtful contribution to class discussion
- active participation in the Final Course Project Q&As

There will be an attendance roster to sign at every class. More than three absences over the term will negatively impact your overall grade. Five unexcused absences will result in a failure for the course regardless of your performance in the papers and the Final Course Project.

3 x Papers

Three papers are due over the course of the semester.

Each paper will ask students to discuss the themes of that section of the course, with reference to the assigned novels and class discussions.

Each paper should be 5 or 6 pages long, double spaced, and proof-read for clarity, substance, and style.

All papers should be handed to me in hard copy in class on the due date. Schedule for papers, as follows:

	Paper set	Paper due
Paper 1	Sept 18	Sept 25
Paper 2	Oct 9	Oct 16
Paper 3	Nov 13	Nov 20

Papers will be graded on a point scale from 0-100. Any paper delivered late will be penalized by 3 points a day, up to a maximum of 7 days, after which the paper will be judged uncompleted. (Uncompleted assignments receive a zero).

Final Course Project

In the session on Sept 18, I will outline complete details of the Final Course Project. The project will involve you researching an American subculture of your choice, through a 'bookpackers' perspective.

I will offer a variety of examples of American subcultures, each of them connected to a specific group of people in a specific regional location. For each, I will offer examples of novels or texts that might be use to explore that facet of the American experience. You can choose to research one of

the examples I offer; or you might be inspired to come up with an idea of your own, based on a book or place you know well, or a book / place / culture that intrigues you.

This is a 'summative' project, in that it will involve you incorporating new skills learnt over the course of the class. You will be expected to think, and work, in a cross-humanities way, as befitting the 'bookpackers' idea - weaving together place, people, and text, and forging connections between past and present, making sense of complex cultural phenomena through this cross-disciplinary lens.

The project will be delivered as a combination of prose (2500 words minimum) and other media - images, audio, film clips etc - uploaded to a blog. All details of format and technical practicalities will be given on Sept 18.

Different elements of the project will be due over the course of September, October and November, according to a formal schedule I will distribute on Sept 18.

Uploaded online elements will be 'locked' on Nov 13, after which no changes will be made.

In the final sessions of the course, we will make time for you to share your findings with your classmates, highlighting key elements of your original research, and fielding questions.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

"You never really understand a person ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

- Atticus Finch in 'To Kill a Mockingbird'

The challenge is empathy - understanding the mystery of other people. Fiction offers a solution. The fictional landscape is full of people who behave and think differently to us. Spending time in the company of these fictional characters, we come to understand what has made them how they are. We may never come to sympathize with them; but we can, at least, empathize. We can understand. Empathy in America today is in short supply. The nation is culturally divided. This course aims to help us bridge that gulf of misunderstanding.

It does so in a way that is cross-disciplinary, combining elements of literature, history, geography, politics and social studies. It encourages holistic study - a pure humanities experience, pushing us to think in surprising ways.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

1 – Critical and creative. Students will learn:

- to understand in depth the complex relations between a culture and its representations
- to grasp the skills and theories of interpretation and to see how interpretive interests shift with time and place
- to study a range of contrasting narratives from the perspective of several disciplines
- to engage in self-directed research
- to exercise their own skills in writing, generating new ideas by controlling and shaping language

2 – Philosophical and empathetic. Students will learn:

- to study behaviors of complex characters leading uncertain lives with competing values, weighing human costs and human benefits
- to test attitudes and understandings that are beyond their own immediate experience
- to engage with complex literatures as a preparation for understanding complex lives

3 – General Education (Humanistic Inquiry). Students will:

- cultivate a critical appreciation for various forms of human expression, including literature, language, philosophy, and the arts, as well as develop an understanding of the contexts from which these forms emerge;
- read and interpret actively and analytically, think critically and creatively, and write and speak persuasively;
- evaluate ideas from multiple perspectives and to formulate informed opinions on complex issues of critical importance in today's global world.

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC CONDUCT AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Computer Policy

In this class you are invited to take notes in your book and in a notebook. Please do not use an electronic device (computer, phone, iPad, etc.) to take notes, unless you have a documented disability that requires it (in which case, please provide me with this notification).

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism - presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words - is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Section 11, Behavior Violating University Standards <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the Department of Public Safety <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community - such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member - can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. The Center for Women and Men <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage <http://sarc.usc.edu/> describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the American Language Institute <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. The Office of Disability Services and Programs http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information <http://emergency.usc.edu> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

Adjustments to this Syllabus may be made during the course of the semester.