

ENGL 352g: BOOKPACKING

Exploring US regional cultures through contemporary novels

Fall 2019 TuTh 9.30-10.50am VKC-210

Instructor: Andrew Chater chater@usc.edu

Office hours - Tuesday 11am to 3pm, THH-412 - or Skype by appointment

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 has designed a variety of classes for USC Dornsife based on the ‘bookpacking’ concept.

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.

Please note - this class is the ‘on campus’ version of ‘Bookpacking’, taught in a classroom context in the Fall Semester. It is not to be confused with the Bookpacking New Orleans Maymester, which shares the same ENGL-352 scheduling number.

REQUIRED READING

1 - Novels

- The Big Sleep - Raymond Chandler, 1939
- Deliverance - James Dickey, 1970
- Song of Solomon - Toni Morrison, 1977
- Other Voices, Other Rooms - Truman Capote, 1948
- My Ántonia - Willa Cather, 1918
- Ceremony - Leslie Marmon Silko, 1977
- Typical American - Gish Jen, 1991

2 - Short Story Collections

- Olive Kitteridge - Elizabeth Strout, 2008
- Woman Hollering Creek - Sandra Cisneros, 1991
- Close Range - E. Annie Proulx, 1999

SYLLABUS AND SCHEDULE

Wk 1/2	Aug 27, 29, Sept 3, 5		Los Angeles
	<i>The course begins in L.A., 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>		
	<i>Required reading (by Sept 3)</i>	The Big Sleep - Raymond Chandler	
Wk 3/4	Sept 10, 12, 17		New England
	<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>		
	<i>Required reading (by Sep 12)</i>	Olive Kitteridge - Elizabeth Strout	
Wk 4/5	Sept 19, 24		Appalachian Culture
	<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>		
	<i>Required reading (by Sept 19)</i>	Deliverance - James Dickey	

Wk 5/6	Sept 26, Oct 1, 3		The South
	<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>		
	Required reading (by Oct 1)	Other Voices, Other Rooms - Truman Capote	
Wk 7/8	Oct 8, 10, 15		African American Cultures
	<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>		
	Required reading (by Oct 10)	Song of Solomon - Toni Morrison	
Wk 8/9	Oct 22, 24, 29		The Midwest
	<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>		
	Required reading (by Oct 22)	My Ántonia - Willa Cather	
Wk 10	Oct 31, Nov 5		Mexican American Culture
	<i>Chicano authors celebrate the traditional and folkloric, whilst acknowledging an ongoing struggle for a slice of the American Dream.</i>		
	Required reading (by Oct 31)	Woman Hollering Creek - Sandra Cisneros	
Wk 11	Nov 7, 12		Native American Culture
	<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>		
	Required reading (by Nov 12)	Ceremony - Leslie Marmon Silko	
Wk 12/13	Nov 14, 19, 21		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 21)	Close Range - E. Annie Proulx	
Wk 14/15	Nov 26, Dec 3, 5		New York City / Immigrant America
	<i>New York fiction is a world in itself, and could form the basis for a whole new Bookpackers 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 Dec 3)	Typical American - Gish Jen	

ASSIGNMENTS / ASSESSMENT

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

- Participation: 10%
- Paper 1 = 20%
- Papers 2 & 3 (15% x 2) = 30%
- Final Course Project: 30%
- Final Course Project Presentations: 10%

Participation

Participation is defined as:

- attendance at all sessions
- reading fully the required texts (*see section below on 'pop quizzes'*)
- thoughtful contribution to class discussion
- active participation in the Final Course Project Q&As

Attendance will be noted 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.

Pop Quizzes

Reading the set texts in their entirety is an absolute requirement to complete this course.

To ensure this, I will spring 'pop quizzes' on the class, on four random occasions over the course of the semester. These quizzes will test basic plot points of the novels, simply to check you've read the books on schedule. You must get six out of ten answers correct to prove you've read the book. Fail to achieve six correct answers, and you will have a further 24 hours before facing a 'viva' (a verbal examination). Fail to convince me that you've read the book, and you will have three points subtracted from your final course score - representing a full grade.

You may each opt out of reading one novel during the course of the Semester. You must declare to me in advance that you are choosing to opt out of the upcoming book; it cannot be declared retrospectively at the point that I set the pop quiz! (You would be wise to save this privilege for a particularly busy part of the Semester).

To keep on top of the reading, please study this table of dates. It provides the number of days available to read a book, the page count of each book, and thus the number of pages you need to be reading per day, at that point of the course.

(Course Begins)	08.27		
The Big Sleep	09.03	6 days / 277pp =	46 pages per day
Olive Kitteridge	09.12	9 days / 320pp =	36 pages per day
Deliverance	09.19	7 days / 278pp =	40 pages per day
Other Voices, Other Rooms	10.01	12 days / 208pp =	18 pages per day
Song of Solomon	10.10	9 days / 352pp =	40 pages per day
My Ántonia	10.22	12 days / 175pp =	15 pages per day
Woman Hollering Creek	10.31	9 days / 165pp =	14 pages per day
Ceremony	11.12	12 days / 243pp =	20 pages per day
Close Range	11.21	9 days / 285pp =	32 pages per day
Typical American	12.03	12 days / 296pp =	25 pages per day

It's up to you to note when the reading workload is particularly heavy, and to plan accordingly. (So - as an example - I would advise you finish 'Other Voices, Other Rooms' in fewer than 12 days, in order to get ahead with 'Song of Solomon').

3 x Papers

Paper 1 - Due: Sept 26
(Focus on one of 'The Big Sleep' / 'Olive Kitteridge' / 'Deliverance')
Write a critical review of your chosen novel

Paper 2 - Due: Nov 5
(Focus on one of 'Other Voices, Other Rooms' / 'Song of Solomon' / 'My Ántonia')
How well does your chosen novel succeed as a novel of place?

Paper 3 - Due: Dec 3
(Focus on one of 'Ceremony' / 'Woman Hollering Creek' / 'Close Range')
Discuss the political and thematic repercussions of your chosen novel

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, and emailed in pdf format to chater@usc.edu

Papers can be delivered in advance, and there's no need to wait to read all the novels listed before choosing which to write about. (So, for instance, you can write about 'Other Voices, Other Rooms' without waiting to read 'Song of Solomon' and 'My Ántonia').

If you wish for me to comment on papers in draft, I am happy to do so, but only if they arrive one week before the due date.

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 5 days, after which the paper will be judged uncompleted. (Uncompleted assignments receive a zero).

- Notes on Paper 1

This first paper invites a personal response. What did you think of the novel?

Essentially, what I'm looking for here is the kind of thing you might find in the books section of a contemporary newspaper. Such reviews balance objective criticism with personal reflection. They give the reader both a sense of the book, and what the reviewer thought of the book.

'Criticism' is usually understood these days in the negative sense, but the word is actually neutral - you can just as well write positive criticism. What I'm looking for is an honest, personal, interesting response. I want to know what you thought, and I want to see you back up your thoughts with considered and insightful argument.

Don't google around the subject. Don't quote any secondary sources. I have no interest in what other people think about the book, or what received wisdom is about the book. I am interested in you, and what's inside your head, and the originality, honesty and clarity of your thinking.

Don't give lengthy descriptions of plot. You might want to describe the plot briefly in broad overview, enough to give the reader a sense of what the book is 'about'. And you're likely to give some details of plot, to illustrate some of the points you're making. But I don't want a synopsis of 'what happens'.

Work out the 'big picture' of what you're trying to say, and structure your work accordingly, using paragraphs as the building blocks of good structure. The reader wants to be interested in the detail, but also to have a sense of where we're 'going'.

Quote from the text, enough to back up your arguments. Choose interesting and apposite quotes; find the quotes that are really telling and nail what you're trying to say, and to give a sense of the 'reader experience'. But don't bother with citations; I shall trust that the quotes you offer come from the text.

- Notes on Paper 2

This second paper invites a discussion of a novel from a 'bookpacking' perspective. What aspects of regional place, culture, geography and history emerge from your chosen book?

Feel free to absorb ideas from our seminars into this second paper - but strive, too, for originality and unique perspectives.

- Notes on Paper 3

This third paper invites a reflection on themes of contemporary political relevance. You might choose to write about gender, or the environment, or land rights, or ethnicity, or the border. So many fascinating political themes emerge from the three books under discussion.

Remember to root your discussion in the book. Don't be so distracted by the politics that you forget to discuss the novel. Quote liberally, and cite instances and attitudes that spring from the pages of your chosen book.

Politics can invite strong feelings. That's fine. There's much to feel passionate about in the contemporary political arena. But as with the other two papers, strive for originality too. Don't let your passion become merely predictable!

- General notes on Writing Style and 'Voice'

You'll have gathered, from what I'm outlining above, that I'm suggesting you break from the norms of academic writing. What you write for me might be very different in tone from what you write for other professors, and I'm inviting you to shake off some of the academic strictures you may be used to.

Last semester, I had a student who wanted to compare two novels, and he began a paragraph, "In the context of an intertextual paradigm...". Yuk! This is not how people speak in the real world. This kind of language is alienating and elitist. In the real world we want clarity, and we want 'voice'.

Your voice matters. The way you write is an opportunity to discover your voice. So - write with personality. Translate the way you speak to a written style that flows on the page. That doesn't mean abandoning good grammar; grammar is incredibly useful. (So - in that last sentence, I used a

semi-colon correctly, because it helped the flow of the sentence. But also, look - I just started a sentence with a 'But'. And - look - I've just used a dash. A peppering of dashes, in fact. And, whoops, there was a sentence without a verb!).

You get my drift? What you're hearing here is my 'voice'. And there's a real joy in finding that voice, and in using that voice to communicate ideas to the reader.

So. Loosen up your style, and write for the 'real world' - without being lazy or slapdash. It's a challenge, and you may find it hard after years of 'academic' thinking. But enjoy the process!

(If you want further inspiration on how to write well, read George Orwell, the greatest prose stylist of the 20th century. His inspired and important essay "Politics and the English Language" is available online).

Final Course Project

By the end of the Semester, you will research and deliver a multimedia project on the experience of 'bookpacking' a novel (most likely, a Los Angeles novel) of your choice.

The report will describe how the novel you have chosen helps us understand a particular region or subculture of L.A.. But more than that - it will describe the immersive experience of 'bookpacking' the novel - meaning, that you'll have visited the locations described, and will report back on the interplay between text and reality.

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, maps, audio, film clips etc - uploaded as a single online blog item.

On Blackboard, you will find an 'Inspiration List' of Los Angeles novels, with a brief description showing how each ties into a particular district or culture of the city. Chose one that interests you and let me know your choice, and this will then become 'your' subject for the semester. Read the book, plot the locations, visit the settings, interact with the locals. Live the book as 'immersively' as you can. The more immersive your experience, the more vibrant and interesting your final project.

As an example of what I'm talking about, here's a link to a 'bookpacking' blog I wrote in New Orleans a year or so ago. Don't imitate my style too slavishly - but it does give a good idea of how text, place, people, past and present can all be interwoven into one holistic experience:

<https://www.bookpackers.com/master-feed/2018/5/24/searching-for-buddy-bolden>

It will be up to you to plan when and how you will visit the L.A. locations in the novel. Discuss the logistics with me if you are concerned about this. Some L.A. locations are safer than others; be wise, and keep me abreast of your plans.

You may, if you choose, select a novel from any part of the US - but only if you have the opportunity to visit that location at some point during the semester, perhaps at Fall Recess, or during the Thanksgiving Holiday.

For inspiration of US novels more generally, visit the website bookpackers.com, click on the 'destinations' tab, and browse the US map.

Alternatively, discuss your intended destination with me, and I may have suggests of a text / novel that might work.

- Project Schedule

Aim to have selected text / novel by the end of September, checking with me and describing the idea behind the project - how text and culture / location will interact.

I will brief you all on the online elements, giving access to the blog portal, by mid October.

Aim to have conducted the immersive elements of the experience by mid November. (It would be possible to delay the travel elements to the Thanksgiving Holiday, but this won't leave you long to write - be warned).

Uploaded online elements will be 'locked' on Wednesday December 11th, after which no changes will be made.

- Final Presentations

There is an oral element to the Final Project.

During exam week, you will attend an afternoon session with a group of your peers, during which time you will present your projects to the group, 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

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.