

ENGL 352g: BOOKPACKING THE BIG EASY
A cultural and literary journey through New Orleans and Southern Louisiana

Dates: Monday May 18 to Friday June 12, 2020

Instructor: Andrew Chater chater@usc.edu

OVERVIEW

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

The subject of our investigation is New Orleans, the “Big Easy,” and its environs. It is an extraordinary destination, formed of a fusion of cultural strands—French, Creole, Cajun, African-American, White Protestant—that have merged into something rich and dynamic.

Over four weeks, we will explore this unique and vibrant region through a handful of classic and contemporary novels, using these fictional texts as cultural guidebooks through which we can ‘unpack’ place and people, past and present.

The course is led by Andrew Chater, an award-winning BBC TV historian and presenter, who has developed the ‘bookpacker’ concept as a series of classes for USC Dornsife. 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.

SCHEDULE

This course was originally intended as an immersive experience taken over four weeks ‘on the road’. Because of the current Covid-19 lockdown, it will now be taught online.

For four weeks, Monday May 18th to Friday June 12th, we will meet together on Zoom for 2.5 hours each morning - from 9.30 to 11.00, and 11.30 to 12.30.

In the afternoons, students will participate in a variety of activities - reading, writing papers, watching movies etc - approx. 4 hours of activities / homework per day.

In the final week of the course, Students will complete a multimedia Special Project, involving an oral presentation, on Zoom. These presentations will take place on Thursday June 11th / Friday June 12th, from 2 to 4pm.

Nb all timings in Pacific Standard Time.

Zoom Invitations / log-ins will be found on Blackboard.

REQUIRED READING

- Kate Chopin - The Awakening
- Anne Rice - Interview with the Vampire (parts 1, 2 and 4 only)
- Michael Ondaatje - Coming Through Slaughter
- Walker Percy - The Moviegoer
- John Kennedy Toole - A Confederacy of Dunces*
- Ernest J. Gaines - A Lesson Before Dying
- Tim Gautreaux - Same Place, Same Things

Plus - one novel per student to read as part of a Special Project, selected from a 'long list' which will be uploaded to Blackboard.

** Please note - John Kennedy Toole's A Confederacy of Dunces should be read before the course begins. It is a weighty novel of 390 pages, and there will not be time to read it during the four weeks' duration of the class.*

ASSIGNMENTS / ASSESSMENT

You will be graded on participation, two papers, and a Special Project, as follows:

- 15% - participation in Zoom seminars / discussions
- 40% - two papers (20% each), for a total of 2500 words
- 30% - Special Project, for a total of 3000 words plus multimedia elements
- 15% - Special Project Oral Presentation

**** A full schedule listing day to day activities, and a complete breakdown of all assignments and deadlines, will be found on Blackboard one week before the start of the class ****

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The opening line of the USC English Department mission statement says it all: “We tell stories, and stories make us human.”

The objective of this Maymester course is to reach a critical understanding of the eclectic nature of New Orleans. It's not enough to see that New Orleans is different—our intent is to understand why it's different. We might describe New Orleans as wild, transgressive, vibrant, atmospheric, nocturnal, decadent, a ‘party city’—but what explains these particular characteristics? How has the city evolved over time to become the extraordinary place we know today?

Our aim is to use novels as guidebooks, steering us through the physical, cultural and spiritual heart of New Orleans and its environs. This is a unique humanities experiment that will demand of us an authentic desire to dig deep, opening ourselves up to new experiences, testing our feelings, encouraging empathetic responses, as readers and as ‘virtual’ explorers.

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;
- collaborate effectively through traditional and new ways of disseminating knowledge.

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.