

## ENGL 352g: BOOKPACKING

### *Exploring US regional cultures through contemporary novels*

Fall 2020      Tu / Th 9.30-10.50am      on Zoom (see Blackboard for logins)  
Instructor:    Andrew Chater                              [chater@usc.edu](mailto:chater@usc.edu)  
Office hours                                      Zoom 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 - New England, the Appalachia, the Hispanic Southwest and so on — 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, 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 are 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](http://www.bookpackers.com) for more information on the concept behind the class, and [www.andrewchater.com](http://www.andrewchater.com) for more information on the class instructor.

## SYLLABUS AND SCHEDULE

Aug 18, 20, 25		Los Angeles
<p><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></p>		
	<i>Required reading (by Aug 25)</i>	The Big Sleep - Raymond Chandler
Aug 27, Sept 1, 3		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 Sept 1)</i>	Olive Kitteridge - Elizabeth Strout
Sept 8, 10		The Appalachia
<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 8)</i>	Deliverance - James Dickey
Sept 15, 17, 22		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 17)</i>	Other Voices, Other Rooms - Truman Capote
Sept 24, 29, Oct 1		African America
<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.</i></p>		
	<i>Required reading (by Sept 29)</i>	Song of Solomon - Toni Morrison
Oct 6, 8		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>		
	<i>Required reading (by Oct 6)</i>	My Ántonia - Willa Cather
Oct 13, 15		Mexican America
<p><i>Chicano authors celebrate the traditional and folkloric, whilst acknowledging an ongoing struggle for a slice of the American Dream.</i></p>		
	<i>Required reading (by Oct 13)</i>	Woman Hollering Creek - Sandra Cisneros

Oct 20, 22		Native America
<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>		
	<i>Required reading (by Oct 22)</i>	Ceremony - Leslie Marmon Silko
Oct 27, 29, Nov 3		The 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>		
	<i>Required reading (by Nov 3)</i>	Close Range - E. Annie Proulx
Nov 5, 10, 12		New York City
<i>New York fiction is a world in itself. 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>		
	<i>Required reading (by Dec 12)</i>	Typical American - Gish Jen

## ZOOM PROTOCOL

I would like everyone to be on camera during Zoom sessions. Please feel free to turn on a virtual background if you wish to preserve the privacy of your domestic environment.

Meeting online can be a challenge for some of us. Finding quiet spaces with a good wifi signal is not always easy. If you have a need for any form of accommodation in the Online learning space, please do contact me and we can discuss solutions - or send me a DSP accommodation request.

## 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

In a shortened semester, this is a heavy reading load. To keep on top of the reading, please study this table. 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. It's up to you to note when the reading load is particularly heavy, and to plan accordingly.

(Course Begins)	08.18		
The Big Sleep	08.25	7 days / 277pp =	40 pages per day
Olive Kitteridge	09.01	7 days / 320pp =	46 pages per day
Deliverance	09.08	7 days / 278pp =	40 pages per day
Other Voices, Other Rooms	09.17	9 days / 208pp =	23 pages per day
Song of Solomon	09.29	12 days / 352pp =	29 pages per day
My <i>Ántonia</i>	10.06	7 days / 175pp =	24 pages per day
Woman Hollering Creek	10.13	7 days / 165pp =	24 pages per day
Ceremony	10.22	9 days / 243pp =	27 pages per day
Close Range	11.03	12 days / 285pp =	24 pages per day
Typical American	11.12	9 days / 296pp =	33 pages per day

## ASSIGNMENTS / ASSESSMENT

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

- Participation: 10%
- Paper 1 = 25%
- Paper 2 = 25%
- Special Project: 30%
- Special Project Presentations: 10%

### **Participation**

Participation is defined as:

- attendance at all Zoom seminars
- reading fully the required texts
- thoughtful contribution to Zoom discussions
- active participation in the Special Project Presentations

Attendance will be noted at every class. More than three absences over the Semester 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 Special 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 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).

## **2 x Papers**

Paper 1 - Due: 9am Sept 24

(Focus on one of 'The Big Sleep' / 'Olive Kitteridge' / 'Deliverance' / 'Other Voices, Other Rooms')

Write a critical review of your chosen novel

Paper 2 - Due: 9am Oct 29

(Focus on one of 'Song of Solomon' / 'My Ántonia' / 'Woman Hollering Creek' / 'Ceremony')

- Options:
- 1 - Write a critical review of your chosen novel
  - 2 - How well does your chosen novel succeed as a novel of place?
  - 3 - Discuss a thematic element of your chosen novel

Each paper should be 5 or 6 pages long, double spaced (approx. 1750 words). Please proof-read for clarity, substance, and style.

All papers should be emailed to me in pdf format. Late delivery may incur a grade reduction.

- 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. Imagine the novel in question were being reissued in a contemporary edition. The reviewer's job is to balance objective criticism with personal reflection. Try to give the reader both a sense of the book, and what you 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'. You are likely to provide 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'. Please don't feel obliged to include citations; think more journalistically, and quote the text as a newspaper reviewer might quote the text - rather than as an academic might quote the text!

Obviously, you're writing about books which are not contemporary. Keep in mind when they were written, and let that sense of period be a part of what you're reviewing. How well does the book hold up? How significant is the book as a historical artifact?

- Notes on Paper 2

Paper 2 broadens your options.

If you wish, you can discuss your chosen novel from a 'bookpacking' perspective. What aspects of regional place, culture, geography and history emerge from your chosen book?

Or, you might wish to home in on one particular thematic aspect of the book that interests you.

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

- General notes on Writing Style and 'Voice'

You'll have gathered, from what I have outlined 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. But rules are meant to be broken, provided you break the rules in your 'voice', and with style (or what the French call 'panache').

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 please, enjoy the process!

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

- What am I looking for when I'm grading papers?

Grading is subjective. There is no formula for writing good essay. My grading style may differ from that of other professors.

But let me reiterate the key points I've outlined above:

- 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.
- I am interested in the originality, honesty and clarity of your thinking.
- Write with personality. Let me hear your 'voice'. Translate the way you speak to a written style that flows on the page.

### **Special Project**

By the end of the Semester, you will research and deliver a multimedia project 'bookpacking' a novel of your choice.

You should choose a novel set wherever you will be based for the duration of the class. The project will describe the immersive experience of 'bookpacking' the novel. The hope is that you should personally visit the locations in the novel, and report back on the interplay between text and reality. (If physical travel is prohibited by the Covid situation, then your research will be 'virtual', using online research tools).



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. Delivery format will depend on the media you choose. If you just choose to use words and images, then you can deliver in Pdf.

Please consult with me early in the Semester so I can help you think about possible novels local to you. You should have chosen and ordered your Special Project novel by mid September.

We will talk more about the Special Projects early in the Semester, and I'll provide examples of previous students' work, to inspire you in terms of content, format and design.

#### - 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](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.**