

ENGL 352g - BOOKPACKING LOS ANGELES

A journey through the culture and literature of L.A.

Section: 32707

Spring 2021 Wednesdays, 4.30pm to 6.50pm Hybrid (Online / THH106)
Instructor: Andrew Chater chater@usc.edu Office hours - Zoom by appointment

This 4-unit class is an exercise in 'bookpacking,' an innovative form of literary adventure in which novels serve as portals through which we can explore regional history and culture. We offer 'bookpacking' in a variety of forms at USC. In this particular class, we're bookpacking Los Angeles - exploring the myriad cultures of USC's home city through some great L.A. novels.

Over the course of Semester we will read a range of classic and contemporary L.A. fiction, and we'll make a virtual 'road trip' across the city, exploring the locations where the novels are set - from Hollywood to South L.A., from Downtown to the Hills, from Boyle Heights to the beaches. We'll take a metaphorical walk in the footsteps of fictional characters, and reflect on the intersection between literary landscapes and the contemporary cultures of L.A.

It's a great way, week by week, to explore the rich variety of this extraordinary city.

The class is lead by Andrew Chater, a BBC historian and filmmaker who leads a variety of 'Bookpacking' classes at USC - see www.bookpackers.com for more information.

The class is accredited for General Education - all majors welcome.

Please note, this class is usually taught as an immersive experience, incorporating 'off campus' elements.

For Spring Semester 2021, we are scheduling this class as a hybrid class, meaning that *if circumstances permit* we will build in some physical off-campus experiences in the latter weeks of the semester. The class is scheduled for a late afternoon Wednesday slot (4.30 to 6.50pm); if we head off campus, we may return later than 6.50pm. Please be open for this possibility should you enroll for the class.

REQUIRED READING / ASSIGNMENTS

Attendance

Full attendance and active participation in all seminars and sessions

Reading

7x core novels:

- The Day of the Locust - Nathanael West, 1939 (127pp)
- The Big Sleep - Raymond Chandler, 1939 (251pp)
- Lithium for Medea - Kate Braverman, 1979 (359pp)
- The Barbarian Nurseries - Héctor Tobar, 2011 (422pp)
- Southland - Nina Revoyr, 2003 (348pp)
- If He Hollers Let Him Go - Chester Himes, 1945 (203pp)
- The Tortilla Curtain - T.C. Boyle, 1995 (355pp)

1x 'free choice' novel from an L.A. 'long list' (see appendix)

Written Work

Papers

- 2 x papers on your critical response to the novels
- *1250 to 1750 words per paper = 3000 words total*

Thematic Reflections

- 4 x creative submissions reflecting on themes explored in the class over the course of the semester
- *approximately 250 words each, depending on the nature of the creative submission.*

Special Project

- Select a novel from the L.A. 'long list', and complete a special project, 'bookpacking' the novel you have chosen, showing how it illustrates and reflects the culture of a particular facet of contemporary L.A.
- *2500 words + photos and interactive media*

Presentation

- Present the findings of your special project to the class

GRADING

- Participation: 10%
- Papers (20% x 2): 40%
- Thematic Reflections (5% x 4): 20%
- Final Course Project: 25%
- Final Course Project Presentations: 5%

WEEKLY SCHEDULE AND CONTENT

Week 01 - The Golden Land

Wednesday January 20

In this introductory session we'll debate a series of concentric 'Dreams' - the American Dream, the California Dream, and the L.A. Dream - exploring the attributes of each. We'll look at L.A.'s foundational myth, a romantic world of haciendas and orange groves immortalized in Helen Hunt Jackson's wildly influential SoCal novel 'Ramona' (1884). We'll discover how the so-called "boosters" used the 'Ramona' myth to package L.A. for sub-division and sale - whilst disenfranchising the city's Latino population.

Week 02 - The Cheated

Wednesday January 27 *read by this date: The Day of the Locust*

What kinds of people came to Los Angeles in its foundational decades? Novels from the 1920s onwards satirize these people as small-minded 'folk' from the Midwest, easy prey for the boosters, speculators, quacks and charlatans that grew rich at their expense. Our core text this week is Nathanael West's 1930s classic 'The Day of the Locust', which offers a dystopian vision of L.A. as a place of rootlessness, fakery, spiritual hunger and bubbling anger.

Week 03 - Roaming the Town

Wednesday February 03 *deadline for delivery: Reflections 01*

This week we'll look at L.A.'s historic Downtown, through the prism of John Fante's classic novel 'Ask the Dust'. We'll focus on the 1930s, the era of the Depression, and we'll follow in Fante's footsteps from Bunker Hill to Skid Row - which has existed here in Los Angeles since the turn of the 19th century. Comparing Los Angeles then and now, we'll investigate the cause of the disparities of wealth and opportunity that have been a constant in this city over the past century.

Week 04 - Mapping Marlowe

Wednesday February 10 *read by this date: The Big Sleep*

Our focus this week is 'The Big Sleep', the first of Raymond Chandler's novels featuring the private eye Philip Marlowe. We'll explore Chandler's inspirations and antecedents, looking into the roots of L.A. Noir, and asking why such a distinctive and dark genre should come to flower in this supposedly sunny city. We'll trace Marlowe's journeys across the city, and investigate the hidden meanings in the map of Chandler's Los Angeles.

Week 05 - L.A. Noir

Wednesday February 17

Continuing our exploration of L.A. Noir, we'll trace the history of crime fiction into the present, looking at a range of writers from Dorothy B. Hughes to James Ellroy and Michael Connelly. We'll discuss organized crime in L.A. from the 20s to the present, and we'll dig into the grubby politics of the city, exploring how crime and civic corruption have been synonymous with the City of Angels from its foundation into the modern era.

Week 06 - In the Stars

Wednesday February 24 *deadline for delivery: Reflections 02*

This week we explore the Hollywood novel. The movies are synonymous with Los Angeles, and since the silent era, novelists have satirized both the business of moviemaking, and the influence of the movies on the greater culture. We'll look at a cross section of Hollywood fiction, from Budd Schulberg's classic satire 'What Makes Sammy Run?' to Michael Tolkin's 'The Player' and Elmore Leonard's 'Get Shorty'.

Week 07 - Lost Souls

Wednesday March 03 *read by this date: Lithium for Medea*
deadline for delivery: PAPER 01

Kate Braverman's 'Lithium for Medea' presents L.A. as a place of brokenness and disfunction, addiction and loss. We'll look at a range of L.A. novels from the '60s to the '80s that echo these themes, including 'Play It As It Lays' by Joan Didion, and 'Less Than Zero' by Bret Eaton Ellis - and we'll ask: do these novels express a universal despair, or are they representative of a tragedy particular to L.A.?

Week 08 - Driven to Tears

Wednesday March 10

L.A. is a car city, born with the inception of the motor car, growing out rather than up, a sprawling 500 square mile lattice of streets and freeways, of 'sig-alerts' and gridlock. In L.A. novels, the car is a symbol of the dream, and of the transience and soul-hungry searching that is the city's ultimate tragedy. We'll explore the significance and iconography of the car in a host of L.A. texts, from John Fante to Christopher Isherwood to Joan Didion - and in movies from 'Sunset Boulevard' to 'Drive'.

Week 09 - Eastside L.A.

Wednesday March 17 *read by this date: The Barbarian Nurseries*
deadline for delivery: Reflections 03

This week we'll look at the culture of Mexican American Los Angeles - the city's original culture, dispossessed in the mid-19th century, and struggling for economic and social parity ever since. Our core novel this week will be Héctor Tobar's 'The Barbarian Nurseries', which will take us on a journey from the O.C. to Eastside L.A. and to Huntingdon Park, one of L.A.'s many predominantly Latino neighborhoods. The novel offers both a celebration and a challenge, asking critical questions about the racial fault lines within our city.

Week 10 - Chicano City

Wednesday March 24

In this second week on Mexican American L.A., we will explore the rise of the Chicano Power movement in the 1960s, studying excerpts from Oscar Zeta Acosta's controversial classic, 'The Revolt of the Cockroach People'. And we'll look at two novels by Yxta Maya Murray, published in the '90s - stories of the highs and lows of Chicano life, from the rich traditions of faith and family, to the violence and machismo of a life on the streets.

Week 11 - Crenshaw Cultures

Wednesday March 31

read by this date: Southland

This week we'll investigate and celebrate the diversity of Los Angeles, a global city hosting myriad cultures and ethnicities in various degrees of juxtaposition, competition and harmony. We'll look at the shifting patterns of ethnic settlement in the city, and we'll touch on moments in L.A.'s history when racial disparity and intolerance have led to tensions, and worse. Our core text for the week is Nina Revoyr's 'Southland', a multi-character and multi-generational murder mystery set in Crenshaw, which connects L.A.'s African-American and Japanese-American communities.

Wednesday April 7 *Wellness Day - no class*

Week 12 - Central Avenue

Wednesday April 14

read by this date: If He Hollers Let Him Go

deadline for delivery: Reflections 04

deadline for delivery - PAPER 02

We'll spend two weeks of the course digging into the literature of Black L.A., starting with Chester Himes' 'If He Hollers Let Him Go', a blistering account of life in WW2 in Southside L.A. and the Long Beach shipyards. Published in 1945, this is an incendiary text, funny and angry and bold, dissecting with a scalpel the racial anatomy of Los Angeles. We'll explore the origins of Black L.A., the Great Migration, the decades of quasi-segregation, and compare Himes' text with more contemporary accounts of the Black experience in L.A..

Week 13 - Easy Does It

Wednesday April 21

Easy Rawlins is a fictional creation, brought to life in Walter Mosley's series of 14 novels from 'Devil in a Blue Dress' (1990) to 'Charcoal Joe' (2016). This fictional life encompasses the trajectory of L.A.'s African-American experience. We'll use excerpts from Walter Mosley's novels as a form of social history, examining how the life of one fictional character can illustrate a time, a place, and a culture.

Week 14 - Apocalypse L.A.

Wednesday April 28

read by this date: The Tortilla Curtain

deadline for delivery - SPECIAL PROJECT

T.C. Boyle's 1995 novel 'The Tortilla Curtain' describes white Angelenos, supposedly liberal, escaping the problems of the city by creating walled communities in Malibu and Topanga. The novel touches on so much explored in the course thus far: the limits of the dream, disparities of wealth, race and racial conflict. And it adds an extra dimension - what L.A.'s prophet of doom, Mike Davis, has called "the ecology of fear". In 'The Tortilla Curtain', we witness the environmental consequences of our settling communities where fire and mudslides are an annual threat. We'll dissect this coruscating L.A. novel as we draw the threads of the course together.

SPECIAL PROJECTS

From early in the Semester, students will choose an L.A. text from the 'long list' below, and research it for their 'special project'.

The aim is to 'bookpack' the novel, focusing on the way the text reveals particular aspects of a self-contained L.A. culture. Students will be expected to visit key locations and immerse themselves within the relevant community, conducting interviews and taking photographs. The special project will be presented both orally and in multi-media form - details to follow.

Special Projects novel 'long list':

- Oil! - Upton Sinclair, 1927
- Spider Boy - Carl Van Vechten, 1928
- The Postman Always Rings Twice - James M. Cain, 1934
- They Shoot Horses, Don't They? - Horace McCoy, 1935
- Mildred Pierce - James M. Cain, 1941
- What Makes Sammy Run? - Budd Schulberg, 1941
- Double Indemnity - James M. Cain, 1943
- In a Lonely Place - Dorothy B. Hughes, 1947
- The Loved One - Evelyn Waugh, 1948
- The Grifters - Jim Thompson, 1963
- A Single Man - Christopher Isherwood, 1964
- The Pump House Gang - Tom Wolfe, 1968
- Post Office - Charles Bukowski, 1971
- Sex and Rage - Eve Babitz, 1979
- Less Than Zero - Bret Easton Ellis, 1985
- The Black Dahlia - James Ellroy, 1987
- The Player - Michael Tolkin, 1988
- Get Shorty - Elmore Leonard, 1990
- L.A. Confidential - James Ellroy, 1990
- Devil in a Blue Dress - Walter Mosley, 1990
- Snow Crash - Neal Stephenson, 1992
- Always Running - Luis J. Rodriguez, 1993
- The White Boy Shuffle - Paul Beatty, 1996
- Locas - Yxta Maya Murray, 1997
- Angel's Flight - Michael Connelly, 1998
- Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned - Walter Mosley, 1998
- White Oleander - Janet Fitch, 1999
- Be Cool - Elmore Leonard, 1999
- Assumption and other Stories - Daniel Olives, 2003
- Set Up, Joke, Set Up, Joke - Rob Long, 2005
- Inherent Vice - Thomas Pynchon, 2009
- Dead Stars - Bruce Wagner, 2012
- The Sellout - Paul Beatty, 2015
- Gold, Fame, Citrus - Claire Vaye Watkins, 2015
- The Hate U Give - Angie Thomas, 2017

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

The practical objective of this course is to reach a critical and empathetic understanding of the eclectic cultures of Los Angeles. What are the particular characteristics of the city and of its people, and what makes it different to other cities of the US? How was this distinctive character forged, and how has it evolved over time?

The course offers an exciting and unconventional approach to the study of Literature. The idea behind 'bookpacking' is to use novels as guidebooks to place and people, as much as for their literary value. It shows how the study of text can interact with the real world. This is truly a cross-humanities course, weaving together literature, history, geography, politics and social studies - a holistic form of study which will push students to think in surprising ways.

The course is immersive - half in the classroom, half 'on the road'. Immersive study involves a different set of learning parameters - logistically, academically and pedagogically. It involves physical and personal interaction with places and with people. It involves an element of journalistic inquiry. It encourages and necessitates respect for the environment. And it can provoke a more active sense of understanding and empathetic reflection than can be achieved, we believe, in a purely academic context.

The assessment elements of this course - especially the blog and 'special project' - have been tailored especially to encourage these elements of empathetic reflection.

Other 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

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.