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

Location: New Orleans / Southern Louisiana
Dates: May 15 to June 11, 2021 (Maymester 2021)
Instructor: Andrew Chater chater@usc.edu

OVERVIEW

This 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 the course of a four week journey, we will explore this unique and vibrant region through a handful of classic and contemporary novels, which we will read as we travel, using these fictional texts as cultural guidebooks through which we can ‘unpack’ place and people, past and present.

Offered for both English and GE, this Maymester offers a holistic approach to the humanities, combining elements of literature, history, geography, politics and social studies. If you’re interested in an experience 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.

PLEASE NOTE

Andrew teaches three ‘Bookpacking’ courses at USC. All three have the ident 352g.
- The first is a 15-week ‘on campus’ T/Th course in the Fall Semester.
- The second is an immersive class exploring L.A., held on Saturdays in the Spring Semester.
- The third is a ‘Maymester’ class held on location in New Orleans in the weeks following commencement (May 16 to June 10, 2020).

This document describes the third of these two options - please don’t get them confused!
REQUIRED READING

- Kate Chopin - The Awakening
- Anne Rice - Interview with the Vampire
- 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

Please note:

- John Kennedy Toole’s A Confederacy of Dunces should be read before the course begins. It’s a weighty novel, and there will not be time to read it in full whilst we travel.
- We will only be reading Parts 1, 2 and 4 of Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire.

Aside from A Confederacy of Dunces, the aim is to read as we travel, as directed by the course leader, and not before; the critical sensation of reading whilst traveling is a part of the experiential fabric of the course.

In total, we’ll be reading approximately 1200 pages over 25 days, which is 48 pages a day - a pleasure, not a burden - and time will be allocated for this.

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 travelers. Our goal, over four weeks, is to know New Orleans in the connected way that escapes most tourists, but which all true travelers understand.
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.

ASSIGNMENTS / ASSESSMENT

You will be graded on participation, two papers, and a multimedia blog, as follows:

- 40% - two papers (20% each), for a total of 2500 words
- 30% - blogs, for a total of 5000 words plus multimedia elements
- 15% - discussion in seminar
- 15% - participation in field activities

More information regarding the blogs will be given out at the start of the Maymester.

Examples of blogs from the 2018 and 2019 Maymesters can be seen here: https://www.bookpackers.com/nola-student-archive
SYLLABUS AND SCHEDULE

Saturday, May 15 - Travel LAX to New Orleans; minivan to Grand Isle, Louisiana

Sunday, May 16 - Tuesday, May 18 - Grand Isle, Louisiana

The first three days of the course will be spent on Grand Isle, on the Louisianan Gulf Coast, where we'll live together in a spacious holiday house, unwind, and discover how it feels to go “bookpacking”.

Grand Isle is the setting of Kate Chopin’s ‘The Awakening’, and we’ll read this classic Creole novella on the very beach where the story opens - an extraordinary experience.

In our seminars over these three days we’ll explore the roots of Creole culture, digging into French and Spanish colonial history, and discovering the vital importance of the Mississippi Delta region in the history of the North America from the 17th to the 19th Centuries.

Tuesday, May 18, pm - minivan to New Orleans, check into the Hotel Lafayette

Wednesday, May 19 - Sunday, May 30 - New Orleans

The next 11 days of the course will be spent in New Orleans, staying in a comfortable hotel in the Business District, just a short stroll from the French Quarter.

Over this time we will explore the history and culture of New Orleans through three novels:

- We’ll begin by reading Anne Rice's gothic yarn ‘Interview with the Vampire’. The novel begins in early Creole New Orleans, and then develops through the period of New Orleans’ Americanization in the decades that followed the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. It's an inspired introduction to many of the attributes of New Orleans - nocturnal, transgressive, opulent, superstitious - that make this city so unique, and we’ll come to understand how the city’s French roots continue to influence the city today. We’ll explore some fascinating locations, from the French Quarter to the Garden District. We’ll visit the cemeteries, and the swamps surrounding the city that lend New Orleans such gothic charm.

- Next, we'll read Michael Odnaatje's ‘Coming Through Slaughter’, a story set in African American New Orleans during the Jazz Age. We'll dig deep into the city's unique ethnic heritage and come to understand what sets the cultures of New Orleans apart from the rest of the South, and we’ll engage with the contemporary debate surrounding Confederate history and the commemoration of the Old South. We’ll take a day trip out of the city to visit the Whitney Plantation, the only plantation house dedicated to the history of Slavery. We’ll explore Storyville, the Marigny and the Tremé, and trace the heritage of New Orleans jazz into the modern era.
• Finally during this section of the course, we’ll investigate John Kennedy Toole’s inspired comic novel ‘A Confederacy of Dunces’ - the most brilliant contemporary novel through which to understand the atmosphere of modern New Orleans - polyglot, licentious, bawdy and eccentric.

  Monday, May 31 - minivan to Baton Rouge, check into the Hotel Indigo

  Tuesday, June 1 - Thursday, June 3 - Baton Rouge, LA

Based in Baton Rouge, we’ll spend two days exploring Pointe Coupée Parish, the birthplace and home of African American author Ernest J. Gaines. We’ll read his poignant and powerful novel of the Segregated South, 'A Lesson Before Dying', visiting the locations where the novel is set, and visiting Mr Gaines to discuss with him his life and work (to be confirmed).

During this time we’ll also discuss a classic novel of the white South, Robert Penn Warren’s ‘All the King’s Men’, a political thriller about a populist politician which has profound contemporary relevance in the era of Donald Trump. We’ll watch the movie adaptation of the novel, starring Sean Penn, and visit the Louisiana State Capitol where much of the novel is set.

  Thursday, June 3, pm - minivan to Lafayette - check into Maison Madeleine

  Friday, June 4 - Sunday, June 5 - Cajun Louisiana and the Bayou

Our final section of the course - and a real highlight of the experience in 2018 - will be spent in the ‘Cajun Parishes’ of Southern Louisiana. Our text for these days will be ‘Same Place, Same Things’, a series of short stories by Tim Gautreaux, who writes about contemporary Cajun and ‘blue collar’ Louisianan life.

Like Creole culture, Cajun culture has French roots - but it’s more earthy, and stems from a very different folk pathway. We’ll dig into Cajun history, and explore the environment and cultural traditions of people of the Bayou - eating Cajun food and enjoying time spent in the company of some wonderful Cajun musicians.

  Sunday, June 6, pm - minivan back to New Orleans, check back into the Hotel Lafayette

  Monday, June 7 - Friday, June 11 - New Orleans

  Friday, June 11 - travel New Orleans to LAX

Our final few days will be spent back in New Orleans, finishing assignments and consolidating our understanding of the city. A full schedule of assignments will be issued in advance of the course departure.

Please note that this schedule is subject to change due to weather and other unforeseen circumstances.
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.