

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

Dates: Monday May 17 to Friday June 11, 2021

Section: 32708

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 17th to Friday June 11th, we will meet together on Zoom for 2.5 hours each morning - from 9.30-11.00, and 11.30-12.30.

In the afternoons, students will participate in a variety of activities - reading, writing papers, watching movies etc - approx. 4 hours of activities / assignments 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 the mornings of Thursday June 11th / Friday June 11th.

Nb all timings in Pacific Standard Time.

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

		SEMINAR - 9.30 PST start, to 12.30 - (Mid-morning break 11.00 to 11.30) - Zoom Invitation on Blackboard	READING ASSIGNMENTS	VIEWING ASSIGNMENTS / DELIVERY DEADLINES
S			Read: 'A Confederacy of Dunces' <i>(finish before the course begins - 390pp)</i>	
M	05.17	Fresh Perspectives on US History <i>We'll begin by getting to know each other and discussing the nature of the course, and I'll share the idea behind 'bookpacking'. We'll then take a 'big picture' historical overview of New Orleans, establishing the importance of the Mississippi River and the Gulf at the nexus of North American history.</i>	Read: 'The Awakening' <i>(126pp, 2 days = 63 pages a day)</i>	
T	05.18	Kate Chopin's Creole World <i>Today we'll look at the context of 'The Awakening', exploring Creole culture in the late 19th Century, and the life of Kate Chopin. And we'll make a virtual visit to Grand Isle on the Gulf coast, where the novel begins.</i>		
W	05.19	Lestat's New Orleans <i>Winding the story back a century, we will explore the history of Louisiana in the colonial era. We'll make a virtual visit to the French Quarter, the historic heart of New Orleans, and seek out locations from Anne Rice's gothic horror novel 'Interview With The Vampire'.</i>	Read: 'Interview with the Vampire' <i>(220pp, 4 days = 55 pages a day)</i>	
T	05.20	Vampires and Voodoo <i>What makes New Orleans such a perfect setting for a story of supernatural horror? Today, we weave together myriad complex strands in the story of New Orleans, including early elements of the African American story. We'll discuss Free Creoles of Color, and explore the influence of Haiti on the city's cultural mix.</i>		View: 'The Skeleton Key'
F	05.21	1803 and after <i>Today we'll look at the Americanization of the New Orleans that followed the Louisiana Purchase, and we'll explore the Garden District, where opulent mansions stand testament to the wealth of the Antebellum South. We'll make a virtual visit to the Lafayette Cemetery (where Claudia hunts for victims in 'Interview With The Vampire') and we'll explore New Orleans' customs of death and burial.</i>		View: 'Interview With The Vampire'
S	05.22			
S	05.23		Read: 'Coming Through Slaughter' <i>(156pp, 3 days = 52 pages a day)</i>	
M	05.24	Slavery and Plantations <i>New Orleans is rooted in slavery - and today we will confront that trauma. For our seminar this morning, we will be joined by experts from the Whitney Plantation, an Antebellum sugar plantation on the River Road that offers contemporary visitors an unflinching encounter with a harrowing past.</i>		View: '12 Years a Slave'

T	05.25	<p>Storyville and Jazz</p> <p><i>This morning we'll explore the story of African American New Orleans from Emancipation into the early decades of the 20th Century - the context for 'Coming Through Slaughter', Michael Ondaatje's experimental novel about jazz pioneer Buddy Bolden.</i></p> <p><i>In the second half of the morning's seminar, we'll be joined on Zoom by musicians from Preservation Hall, New Orleans' premier jazz venue. They'll share with us their passion for jazz, and demonstrate the evolution of the New Orleans sound.</i></p>		View: 'Bolden'
W	05.26	<p>Katrina and After</p> <p><i>Today we'll draw the story of African American NOLA into the present, exploring New Orleans' traditional Black neighborhoods and 'bookpacking' Central City, the setting for 'Coming Through Slaughter'.</i></p> <p><i>And through fictional and documentary sources, we'll discuss the impact of Hurricane Katrina, the most devastating event in recent NOLA history.</i></p>	<p>Read: 'The Moviegoer'</p> <p><i>(242pp, 5 days = 48 pages a day)</i></p>	View: 'When the Levees Broke'
T	05.27	<p>The White South</p> <p><i>The South is a place of entrenched hierarchies - in class as much as in race. This morning we'll trace the history and folk pathways of the White South, and we'll explore how class hierarchies are the key to much of Southern Literature, from 'The Moviegoer' to 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and 'The Help'.</i></p>		
F	05.28	<p>Memory and Myth</p> <p><i>Developing our discussion on the White South, at this mid-point of the course we'll draw the threads together, discussing how much Southern Literature seems to yearn for a 'myth' of Southern life that is, in effect, a propagandized distortion of the past.</i></p>		View: 'Treme'
S	05.29			
S	05.30			Paper 1 delivery 8pm
M	05.31	<p>Existential New Orleans</p> <p><i>Today we'll explore the New Orleans of Binx Bolling, the protagonist of Walker Percy's complex novel 'The Moviegoer' - and we'll see how Binx's existential yearnings reflect attributes of New Orleans, a place of profound introspection and ennui.</i></p>		
T	06.01	<p>Eccentric New Orleans</p> <p><i>Today, we mop up a smorgasbord of NOLA attributes - exploring this excessive, expressive, licentious, transgressive and irrepressibly rambunctious city through the eyes of Ignatius J. Reilly, the quixotic anti-hero of John Kennedy Toole's 'A Confederacy of Dunces'.</i></p>	<i>(Work on Special Projects)</i>	
W	06.02	<p>Literary New Orleans</p> <p><i>New Orleans has a reputation as a self-consciously literary city - like Paris, and Greenwich Village in New York. Today we ask how that reputation was forged, and we will explore the French Quarter in its literary heyday, when Sherwood Anderson held court and William Faulkner came knocking.</i></p>		

T	06.03	<p>Stanley and Stella</p> <p><i>Like no other writer, Tennessee Williams encapsulates the literary spirit of New Orleans, and his masterpiece, 'A Streetcar Named Desire', is the perfect distillation of the city in dramatic form. We'll explore the 1947 text and the 1951 movie version, and revel in the brilliance with which the play captures the city's character.</i></p>	<p>Read: 'A Lesson Before Dying'</p> <p><i>(256pp, 5 days = 51 pages per day)</i></p>	<p>View: 'A Streetcar Named Desire'</p>
F	06.04	<p>Huey Long's Louisiana</p> <p><i>For the final part of the course, we leave New Orleans and explore Southern Louisiana.</i></p> <p><i>Today we'll make a virtual visit to Baton Rouge, the State Capital, and we'll explore the story of Huey Long, a populist demagogue who took control of Louisiana in the 1930s. We'll ask what his rise tells us about the poor White South - and politics today.</i></p>		<p>View: 'All the King's Men'</p>
S	06.05			
S	06.06			
M	06.07	<p>The Segregated South</p> <p><i>Today we'll make a virtual visit to Pointe Coupée Parish, the setting for 'A Lesson Before Dying', Ernest J. Gaines' tale of injustice in the Segregated South. We'll explore the context for the story, and we'll discuss its resonance in contemporary America.</i></p>		<p>View: '13th'</p>
T	06.08	<p>Jefferson's Journey</p> <p><i>Ernest J. Gaines died, sadly, at the end of 2019. But today we'll make virtual visit to his home, and we'll meet his family, who'll discuss with us his life and legacy.</i></p>	<p>Read: 'Same Place, Same Things'</p> <p><i>(224pp, 4 days = 56 pages per day)</i></p>	
W	06.09	<p>Acadians and Cajuns</p> <p><i>West of New Orleans lie the Cajun Parishes, a land of swamps and Bayous with a distinct and self-contained culture. Today we'll explore Cajun history and character - the context for the short stories of Tim Gautreaux.</i></p>		<p>Special Project delivery 2pm</p>
T	06.10	<p>The Music of the Bayou</p> <p><i>For this final glimpse of Louisiana, we'll be joined by some of the Cajun musicians I've met over the past few years - and they'll give us a taste of the Cajun sound...</i></p> <p>Special Project Presentations 01</p>		
F	06.11	<p>Special Project Presentations 02</p> <p>Course Reflections and Evaluations</p>		
S	06.12			
S	06.13			<p>Paper 2 delivery 8pm</p>

REQUIRED READING

- The Awakening - Kate Chopin, 1899
 - Interview with the Vampire - Anne Rice, 1976
 - Coming Through Slaughter - Michael Ondaatje, 1976
 - The Moviegoer - Walker Percy, 1961
 - A Confederacy of Dunces - John Kennedy Toole, 1963
 - A Lesson Before Dying - Ernest J. Gaines, 1993
 - Same Place, Same Things - Tim Gautreaux, 1996
- + One novel per student to read as part of a Special Project

Please note:

- Please aim to read 'A Confederacy of Dunces' before the course begins, if possible.
- We will only be reading Parts 1, 2 and 4 of 'Interview with the Vampire'.

VIEWING ASSIGNMENTS

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|--|-----------------------------|
| - <i>Movies</i> | <i>view on:</i> |
| The Skeleton Key - Ian Softley, 2005 | \$3.99 on iTunes |
| Interview With The Vampire - Neil Jordan, 1994 | \$3.99 on iTunes |
| 12 Years a Slave - Steve McQueen, 2013 | Feature Films for Education |
| Bolden - Daniel Pritzker, 2019 | \$3.99 on Google or Amazon |
| A Streetcar Named Desire - Elia Kazan, 1951 | Swank Digital Campus |
| All the King's Men - Steven Zaillian, 2006 | \$3.99 on iTunes |
| - <i>TV Drama Series</i> | |
| Treme - David Simon, 2010 (Eps 1-3) | HBO |
| - <i>Documentaries / Documentary Series</i> | |
| When the Levees Broke - Spike Lee, 2006 | HBO |
| 13th - Ava duVernay, 2016 | Netflix |

ASSIGNMENTS / ASSESSMENT

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

- 15% - participation in Zoom seminars, and completion of all reading / viewing assignments
- 50% - two papers (25% each)
- 25% - Special Project
- 10% - Special Project Oral Presentation

PAPERS

Students will deliver two papers over the period of the course.

Paper 1 - Due: 8pm PST, Sunday May 30th
(Focus on either 'The Awakening' or 'Interview With The Vampire')
Write a critical review of your chosen novel

Paper 2 - Due: 8pm PST, Sunday June 13th
(Focus on one of 'Coming Through Slaughter', 'The Moviegoer', 'A Confederacy of Dunces', 'A Lesson Before Dying')
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 your work for clarity, substance, and style.

All papers should be emailed to me in pdf format. Any late delivery will 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'. 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'. 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 artefact?

- 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 PROJECTS

As the culmination of this class, you will research and deliver a multimedia project on the experience of 'bookpacking' a novel of your choice.

This can either be on a New Orleans novel - supplemental to the ones we are already reading - or you can focus on a novel set local to wherever you are now, in lockdown.

You'll find below a list of some supplemental New Orleans novels you may find interesting.

If, however, you would like to choose a novel local where you are now, we should discuss this together. On the first day of the course, I will explain the parameters of the Special Project, and in the afternoon of Monday May 18th I will attempt to call each of you by phone, to discuss your particular circumstances, and to make recommendations of a novel that might suit you. (Or, you can arrange to discuss this with me before the course begins. Send me an email, and we can begin a conversation about this.

Once you have decided on a novel, you should order it immediately - delivery times will be an issue. Or, you can order it by e-book; this may be advisable in the circumstances.

My hope is that by the time you start working on these special projects, the 'lockdowns' may be at least partially lifted - and you may be able to visit some of the locations from your chosen novel. My wish is that you might gain some of the immersive pleasure of 'bookpacking' for yourselves, and this is why I have included a 'local' option.

If the lockdowns persist, and you are not able to visit any of the locations in your chosen novel, then you will have to 'bookpack' the novel virtually, researching the locations online, using StreetView and other tools. This will still prove an interesting and enriching experience.

When the course begins, I will share with you an excellent example of a Special Project, which was written and researched virtually, in a state of lockdown - it gives a great example of what can be achieved even in these trying conditions. The project was written by Rachel Cope, and it describes the experience of bookpacking Joan Didion's Los Angeles novel 'Play It As It Lays'.

You can also refer to the bookpackers.com website for plenty of examples of blog items / Special Projects, written by me and by my students over the past couple of years - but these all had the benefit of visiting the locations in question.

Either way - virtually or 'immersively' - the aim is to deliver a piece of work which shares the experience of exploring the novel from a uniquely 'bookpacker' perspective. 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.

Please don't wait too long to get started on your project! I have allocated three days at the midpoint of the course, when you will be free of reading assignments and other distractions. It is imperative that you are working on the Special Project by this point in the course.

Deadline for delivery of the Special Project - 2pm PST, Wednesday June 09

The project will be delivered as a combination of prose (approx. 2500 words) and other media - images, maps etc. Submit the project as a pdf with the images woven artfully into the text. Be as creative as you can.

There is an oral element to this project. On the two final mornings of the course, you will give an oral presentation to the class, sharing your screen to show images etc. Six students will present each day. Each presentation will last approx. 15-20 minutes with a further 5 minutes for a Q&A.

Some suggested supplemental New Orleans novels -

A Kind of Freedom - Margaret Wilkerson Sexton, 2017

- An impressive and highly regarded debut novel which interweaves the stories of three generations of an African American family in New Orleans.

The Foxes of Harrow - Frank Yerby, 1946

- The first novel by an African-American to sell over a million copies. A Southern historical romance, the novel makes an interesting comparison with *Gone With The Wind*.

A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain - Robert Olen Butler, 1992

- A series of short stories, each of which is narrated by a different Vietnamese immigrant living in Louisiana. This collection won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1993.

The Lower Quarter - Elise Blackwell, 2015

- A murder story which ties together Katrina and the New Orleans' art world

Zeitoun - David Eggers, 2009

- A brilliant and harrowing non-fiction account of a hard-working Syrian-American whose attempts to help others in the aftermath of Katrina led to his incarceration as a suspected terrorist

The Glass Rainbow - James Lee Burke, 2010

- One of a series of mysteries featuring Dave Robicheaux, an alcoholic sheriff's deputy in New Iberia, Louisiana

Moth - James Sallis, 1993

- A crime novel featuring amateur African American detective Lew Griffin

Exquisite Corpse - Poppy Z. Brite, 1996

- Serial killers collide in the gay sub-culture of the French Quarter

A Free Man of Color - Barbara Hambly, 1997

- A murder mystery set in 1833 in Creole New Orleans

The Wild Palms - William Faulkner, 1939 (subsequently published as 'If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem')

- Two interwoven stories of New Orleans and the South

A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge - Josh Neufeld, 2009

- A non-fiction graphic novel about the impact of Hurricane Katrina

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.