

## **I. LI 526-2 Topics in American Literature: L.A. Stories, Spring 2012**

4 Credits; Meets Wednesdays 10 am - 1:30 pm

Emerson Office, Emerson College, Los Angeles Center, (818) 840-9566

Instructor: Paul Mandelbaum / pmandelbaum@ecla.edu

Office hours: Wednesdays before or after class as needed, or e-mail me anytime.

## **II. Course Description:**

**L.A. Stories.** Los Angeles has inspired writers and communicators like few other cities. This course will explore a variety of narrative representations of L.A. across different media and genres and will offer each student a chance to create his or her own L.A. story—a work of fiction, literary journalism, or another form to be agreed upon with the instructor. By reading or viewing and then discussing the works of Nathanael West, Joan Didion, Gore Vidal, and many others, students will develop not only a deeper knowledge of the city in which they now find themselves, but will also learn about the creative processes and themes through which L.A. has come to be most widely understood.

## **III. Course Objectives/Learning Objectives:**

1. To explore and understand how the city has inspired various literary themes and how such themes have in turn influenced our awareness of the city.
2. To analyze how different narrative representations of L.A., including those on film, communicate their ideas and to write about and discuss these methods critically.
3. To create a narrative representation of the city (either a short story, essay, video with supplementary written analysis, or other form to be approved by the instructor) that is original and dramatizes a point about the LA experience.

## **IV. Course Calendar (subject to revision):**

Week 1, Jan 11, Topic: Introduction and Overview.

Be sure to order all the books ASAP so they'll arrive in time. **Please get the editions listed (with Amazon links) on the Classes page of [www.paulmandelbaum.com](http://www.paulmandelbaum.com).** Read tonight's two handouts before next week's class.

Week 2, Jan 18, Topic: L.A. as Promised Land.

Roundtable discussion, preconceptions, lore, expectations.  
Discussion of RAMONA excerpt (handout by Helen Hunt Jackson), "Real Property" (handout by Sarah Davidson).  
View SWINGERS (part 1).

Week 3, Jan 25, Topic: Complications with the LA Dream.

Discussion of ASK THE DUST (by Fante)  
View SWINGERS (part 2).

Week 4, Feb 1, Topic: Further Complications with the dream.

Discussion of WHAT MAKES SAMMY RUN (by Schulberg)

View SUNSET BLVD (part 1).

Week 5, Feb 8, Topic: Noir.

Discussion of THEY SHOOT HORSES DON'T THEY (by McCoy).

View SUNSET BOULEVARD (part 2).

Week 6, Feb 15, Topic: Workshop of creative proposals.

**Creative project proposals due.**

View DAY OF THE LOCUST (part 1).

Week 7, Feb 22, Topic: The Burning of Los Angeles.

Discussion of TWILIGHT: LOS ANGELES (Smith).

View DAY OF THE LOCUST (part 2).

Week 8, Feb 29, Topic: **Mid-term exam.**

Week 9, Mar 7, Topic: Cultures in Conflict.

Discussion of THE TORTILLA CURTAIN (Boyle)

View EL NORTE (part 1).

**Updated Creative project proposals due. Include one-page sample.**

Week 10, Mar 14, Topic: Cultures in Conflict.

Discussion of IF YOU LIVED HERE, YOU'D BE HOME BY NOW (Loh)

View EL NORTE (part 2).

Week 11, Mar 21, Topic: **Workshop of most important “scene” from each creative project.** Bring a photocopy for everyone.

View EL NORTE (part 3).

Week 12, Mar 28, Topic: Man against Nature.

“Holy Water” (handout by Joan Didion).

View CHINATOWN (part 1)

Week 13, Apr 4 Topic: **Presentation of “student’s choice” reports.**

“Polanski’s Inferno” (handout by Jill Robinson). Discussion of "Stupid Girl"  
(by Louis Berney)

View CHINATOWN (part 2)

Week 14, Apr 11, Topic: The Wild West, the New Age, and the Outlaw Psychopath.

Discussion of MYRA BRECKINRIDGE (by Gore Vidal).

View THE PLAYER (part 1)

Week 15, Apr 18, Topic: Workshop.

**Workshop of revised most important scene, or other scene.** Bring a photocopy for everyone.

**Full creative projects due. Only one copy for me,**

Bring a self-address stamped envelope if you'd like it returned to you.

View THE PLAYER (part 2)

**V. Course requirements (and percentage of final grade):**

1. Proposal for creative project—10% (5% each for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> draft)
2. Mid-term exam—25%
3. Creative project—25%
4. Class participation—30%
5. Student's choice project 10%

**VI. Required Texts** (links to amazon.com on my website [www.paulmandelbaum.com](http://www.paulmandelbaum.com) )

Boyle, T.C., THE TORILLA CURTAIN \$15 (Penguin)

Fante, John, ASK THE DUST (Black Sparrow)

Loh, Sandra Tsing IF YOU LIVED HERE, YOU'D BE HOME BY NOW, \$13  
(Riverhead)

McCoy, Horace, THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON'T THEY? \$10 (Midnight Classics)

Schulberg, Budd, WHAT MAKES SAMME RUN \$14 (Vintage)

Smith, Anna Deavere, TWILIGHT: LOS ANGELES, 1992 \$14 (Anchor)

Vidal, Gore, MYRA BRECKENRIDGE, \$14 (Vintage)

**VII. Grading:**

Assignments and exams will be graded according to: coherence of ideas, persuasiveness of argument, originality and appropriateness of style, and attention to sound prose. Class participation will be graded primarily on students' discussion of the texts. See student's choice and creative project addenda below.

**VIII. Attendance:**

Attendance and promptness are mandatory and will affect a student's final grade. More than one unexcused absence will result in an automatic reduction of student's final grade at .33 per missed class (and will also adversely affect the class-participation part of student's grade, which may compound the damage to the final grade). Lateness will be treated on approximately a pro-rata basis.

**IX. Disability Statement:**

"If you believe you have a disability that may warrant accommodations in this class, please register with the disability Services Coordinator, Dr. Anthony Bashir at 216

Tremont Street, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor, (617.824.8415) so that, together, you can work to develop methods of addressing needed accommodations in this class.”

**X. Plagiarism Statement:**

It is the responsibility of all Emerson students to know and adhere to the College’s policy on plagiarism. If you have any question concerning the Emerson plagiarism policy or about documentation of sources in work you produce in the course, you should speak to your instructor.

**XI. Misc.:**

Schedule and procedures are subject to change in the event of extenuating circumstances.

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THE “STUDENT’S CHOICE” REPORT

Each of you will make a presentation (roughly 15 minutes in length) on a book of your choosing that reflects some facet of life in Los Angeles. In addition to sharing with the rest of the class your analysis of this book, you will be expected to have made a field trip to the milieu your book depicts and to compare the book’s treatment with your own additional impressions. For example, *The Loved One* by Evelyn Waugh is a Hollywood satire focused on the funeral industry; you could combine your reading with a trip to nearby Forrest Lawn cemetery.

Interview people you come across on your field trip. If you’re going to Forrest Lawn, for example, ask to talk to an undertaker or salesperson. Or if you’re reading Sandra Tsing Loh’s novel *If You Lived Here You’d Be Home By Now*, find a downtown real estate agent to talk to. If you’re reading a Raymond Chandler mystery, why not find a local P.I. to interview? **You must go place, do something, and talk to someone.** No armchair journalism from the comfort and security of Oakwoods, please. That said, please exercise sound, safety-conscious judgment in your choice.

Take photographs or shoot some video footage to share with us. (Buy one of those cheap disposable cameras if you don’t have access to anything better.) Give us some background info on the author. Tell us what the book has to say about Los Angeles and how it goes about doing it. If the world depicted in your book has changed since its publication, discuss how and show us, too.

I would ask that you restrict your choices to “literary” works of some kind (as opposed to a travel guide). This means novels, story or poetry collections, or works of nonfiction that take an artistic approach, like Luis Rodriguez’ *ALWAYS RUNNING, LA VIDA LOCA: GANG DAYS IN L.A.* Mystery novels and other so-called “genre fiction” are fine, but try to pick good ones.

Choose something that really appeals to you. Spend a little time making your selection so you won’t feel stuck with it later. Read a chapter before you decide for sure; if it bores you, pick something else.

If you’re having trouble making your choice, ask librarians or bookstore clerks for their input. Try a computer search under the subject category “fiction + Los Angeles” (Amazon lists about a thousand). Feel free to bounce some ideas off me.

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**THE CREATIVE PROJECT**

During the semester, each student will complete a full draft (roughly 3,000-4,000 words) of an original creative project that will be worth 25 percent of the final grade.

The project might be a short story, an essay, a piece of literary journalism, a film treatment, a video with supplementary written analysis, or other form to be approved by the instructor. Regardless of the form, each creative project will be designed to express some important idea about the city of Los Angeles that the student finds compelling. Think of it as making a claim about the city and then arguing it--not as directly as you might in a debate class, but more subtly and artistically.

What do I mean by a claim or an argument? Let's take a hypothetical example. Perhaps you're intrigued by the way Southern California seasons are less noticeable than Eastern seasons. You might even wish to say that a person transplanted from the East could believe that there are no seasons here. What are some of the possible implications of this? Well, maybe you want to argue that without a recognizable cycle of seasons, a human being loses his sense of time and mortality. How does that affect a person's character? His sense of ethical responsibility? Her sense of religious accountability?

Let's say you envision a real person (maybe even yourself) and wish to pursue your subject as nonfiction--as essay, maybe, or a documentary film treatment, or even a short documentary film.... Or perhaps you prefer greater freedom of invention and wish to create a character, set him or her in a short story.... All these choices are yours and more.

Most importantly, **PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR IDEA**, your claim—all other creative decisions will grow out of that. A hastily considered idea will lead to problems down the road.

Please bring a one-paragraph **PROPOSAL** to class on **Feb 15**. Later, on **Mar 7**, bring in a more revised (or radically altered) version of the proposal plus a one-page sample showing how it might be executed. I look forward to hearing your ideas!