Exploring the Golden State
A Readers’ Journey Through California History

Rough Course Schedule

- June 3: Discoveries
- June 10: Gilded Age Writers
- June 17: Progressive Era & After
- June 24: War and Postwar
Rough Class Schedule

- Ambrose Bierce (continued)
- Frank Norris
- Jack London
- Brief Class Break
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman
- Robinson Jeffers
- Steinbeck

Bret Harte
By John Pettie
1884
Bierce and Horror

- Widely respected as horror writer
- Critics have ranked him alongside Edgar Allan Poe!
The Mystery of Bierce’s End

- Crossed the border into Mexico in December
- A letter from him dated December 26, 1913, was sent from Mexico

Bierce was not heard from again. His fate remains unknown
Questions About Ambrose Bierce?

Why Frank Norris Matters

- California’s first *novelist* of major reputation
- Influenced what we think about late 19th Century California (many more people know the construct of the “octopus” than have actually read *The Octopus*)
Early Frank Norris

- Born Chicago 1870; attended UCB
- Influenced by popular pseudo-scientific racism
- Zoology with Joseph LeConte

Early Norris

- “Fascinated by the brutal, the coarse, the elemental.”
- Revered cartoonish social Darwinian supermen
- Norris himself was an effete dandy (fancy French leotards at UCB)
**McTeague (1899)**

- National prominence in 1899 with *McTeague*
- Graphic and compelling story of the degeneration of the title character, a “Polk Street dentist”
- Details of actual San Francisco places

**Polk Street Milieu**

Frank Norris Alley (between Polk and Larkin, Bush and Pine)
The Octopus (1901)

- Part 1 of an unfinished trilogy, The Epic of the Wheat
- Describes conflicts between wheat growers and the railroad
- Inspired by the Mussel Slough Tragedy of 1880

A Shifting Reputation

- For 50 years after his death, The Pit seen as his classic
- 1960s: The Octopus
- 1970s: McTeague
Assessment: Frank Norris
- Ambitious plans
- Critics hailed *McTeague* & *The Octopus* as landmarks in naturalistic fiction
- Challenged complacency of polite letters

The “Frank Norris Problem”
- Juvenile racial fixations
- Superficial Social Darwinist theorizing
- Fixations on masculinity and the cult of white American manhood (presaging Hemingway)
The Problem with Norris

- Not fared well with critics in recent decades
- Scholars have revealed his racism & anti-Semitism
- Characterization of women as “naturally” subordinate to men

Frank Norris: Dead at 32

- Most intriguing thing about Norris is his unfulfilled potential
- We don’t know how he might have evolved
- Some evidence he was evolving out of his earlier views
Frank Norris

- But, dying at 32, he never really had time
- Even Jack London (who died at 40) had more time, and more work, to dilute his youthful foolish notions

Questions About Frank Norris?
Why Jack London Matters

- Born San Francisco, came of age in Oakland
- Novelist, journalist, activist
- Gifted, prolific & visionary writer
- Brought tremendous energy and originality to his work
Jack London: Writer/Celebrity

- One of the first writers to become a worldwide literary celebrity
- Public always been more interested in his life than his writing

Why London Matters

- Genuine California writer: California-born, many California themes
- Interests in socialism, agriculture, alcoholism, ecology, mental disability, psychology, science fiction, & animals
Why London Matters

- Gift for inhabiting the personalities of animals
- Also, innovator in the genre that would later become known as science fiction

Why London Matters

- Pioneer in the world of commercial magazine fiction
- One of the first to earn a large fortune from writing
“Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but sometimes playing a poor hand well”

Playing a Poor Hand

- Born January 1876 in San Francisco
- Parents Flora Wellman & William Henry Chaney
- Flora attempted suicide twice while pregnant with Jack
“John Chaney”

- Flora disinterested
- Virginia Prentiss
- John London, 1876-
- Eliza London
- Ina Coolbrith

Charmian Kittredge

- Intelligent, vivacious, daringly independent
- “New Woman”
- Became Jack’s ideal partner & soul mate
Jack and Charmian Collaborate
The Iron Heel (1908)

- A prophetic novel: wealthy control news, and manufacture propaganda feed to the masses
- Future US a polarized society, worshipping a leader with a powerful Personality Cult
**Martin Eden (1910)**

- Too early for the reading public
- Myth of individual success through hard work still dominated American culture
- Horatio Alger inspired; Jack’s realism not welcome

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**The Autobiographical Books Martin Eden (1910)**

- Writer finds his success empty, commits suicide
- As fantastic as Jay Gatsby
- A decade and a half before *Gatsby*, Jack had written the mordant critique of the American myth of success
The Autobiographical Books

*John Barleycorn*

*Alcoholic Memoirs (1913)*

*JOHN BARLEYCORN*

JACK LONDON

"...naturally one of the most vivid, as well as one of the most stimulating books ever penned by a man." —Upton Sinclair

*JOHN BARLEYCORN*

*THE MODERN LIBRARY*

Jack LONDON

Introduction by PETE HAMILL
A Famous and Massively Popular Writer: Yet, He Didn’t Like Writing!
He came up to Sonoma to free himself from writing by becoming a successful rancher.

As he reached 40, Jack maintained a prodigious pace, churning out scores and scores of new pieces. His literary achievement enormous and varied. He produced four hundred nonfiction articles, two hundred stories, fifty books, three plays.
Four Decades of Hard Living

- Turning 40 in 1916, began exploring Carl Jung’s *Psychology of the Unconscious*
- First American author to incorporate Jungian theory into his work
Jack’s historical significance is enormous. His death in Glen Ellen, at the age of forty, on November 22, 1916, leaves us to lament what he might have achieved in the decades ahead, in the richness of a full life.
Yet, unlike so many other authors of his era, London’s work lives on. Translated into more than 100 languages, still widely read around the world.

Jack had a profound influence on writers as varied as Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, Steinbeck, Orwell, H.L. Menken, Hemingway, Kerouac; even activists such as Harry Bridges.
That millions around the globe still read him is testament not only to his talent for descriptive imagery, but also to his gifts as a storyteller.

Above all, what makes Jack so enduring, even one hundred years after his death, is the passionate way he lived his life, a passion animating his very best work.
Questions About Jack London?

Why the Often-Overlooked Charlotte Perkins Gilman Matters
California Writer, Activist, Reformer

- Lived most of her productive life in Pasadena, CA: Arrived 1888, age 28, died there in 1935, age 75
- Prominent novelist, poetry, nonfiction, and crusader for social reform

Why Charlotte Perkins Gilman Matters

- Feminist; leader of the women’s movement
- Role model for future generations of feminists
- Best remembered for the semi-autobiographical story “The Yellow Wallpaper”
The Yellow Wall-Paper

- Written after a severe struggle with postpartum depression
- Seen as her best work
- Written during an inspired two-day frenzy on June 6-7, 1890, in Pasadena

The Yellow Wall-Paper

- A chronicle of one woman’s descent into madness
- Commonly interpreted as a feminist critique of Victorian America’s patriarchal medical system
Why Robinson Jeffers Matters
Author of thirteen sizable collections of poetry
Our Most Original Poetic Voice

- California’s most critically-acclaimed poet
- Many consider him *America’s finest 20th-century poet*
- Critics: compared to Shakespeare and Homer!

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The Robinson Jeffers Cannon

- *Californians*, 1916
- *Roan Stallion*, 1925
- *The Women at Point Sur*, 1927
- *Give Your Heart to the Hawks*, 1933
The Robinson Jeffers Cannon

- *Solstice*, 1935
- *Be Angry at the Sun*, 1941
- *The Double Axe*, 1948
- *The Beginning and the End*, 1963

Una Became His Muse

- Jeffers met Una Call Kuster in 1906
- She was three years older and married to a prominent LA attorney
Robinson and Una Jeffers

- As they crossed the hill from Monterey, wrote Jeffers, they realized they had discovered “our inevitable place”

Together, Una and Robinson built Tor House
The natural homestead consisted of Tor House, Hawk Tower, a garden courtyard, a hillside covered with wild flowers, and a grove of trees.
Much of his poetry was written in narrative and epic form

- Icon of environmental movement
- “Inhumanism”
- Human concerns should be subordinated to the larger needs of the earth

He employed nature to place humans in the greater scheme of existence. Our species is not central to the cosmos.
Tor House, Carmel

- Mankind was too self-centered
- Too focused on itself to see the profundity of the natural world
- Too indifferent to the astonishing beauty of things

“Who drinks the wine / Should take the dregs; even in the bitter lees and sediment / New discovery may lie.”
Questions About Robinson Jeffers?
John Steinbeck

- One of America’s most significant twentieth-century writers
- Popularity spans the world
- Impressive range and output

A writer of great versatility

- The novels
- Non-fiction
- Plays
- Short stories
- Movie scripts
- Journalism
- Scientific investigations
Hard-Working

- Sixteen novels
- Short story collections
- Four screenplays
- Four collections of essays
- Three travel narratives
- Two published journals
- Three Broadway plays
- A musical (*Pipe Dream*)

California’s only Nobel Prize winner for literature, 1962
Jackson Benson

In the series of books appearing in the mid to late 1930s he elevated California literature

Forever challenged the notion that great writers could not emerge from such a “marginal” region

Steinbeck’s Legacy
The Enigmatic Steinbeck

- His life was more interesting, more complicated, than people allow

- Most of all, he was not a cliché

The Enigmatic Steinbeck

- Never easy to pigeonhole personally, politically, artistically

- Eastern critics often simply could not see what he was up to
Grew up in Salinas in middle class comfort

Born in Salinas, 1902
Attended Stanford University three times
Carol and John Steinbeck: Portrait of a Marriage, by Susan Shillinglaw

- Collaborator, sounding board & editor
- Inspired the titles for Of Mice and Men (from poet Robert Burns) and The Grapes of Wrath (from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”)

Ed Ricketts and Steinbeck
Ed Ricketts (1897–1948)

- Trailblazing marine biologist, visionary conservationist, ecologist
- Scientific, philosophical, musical and literary interests

Steinbeck Finds His Muse

- Ricketts ran his own scientific and commercial laboratory on the Monterey waterfront
- He wrote the descriptions of marine life that take up the second half of *Sea of Cortez*
Ed Ricketts as “Doc”

- Several Doc-like figures in Steinbeck’s fiction, all shrewd observers of life
- Doc Burton in *In Dubious Battle*, Casey in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and of course Doc himself in *Cannery Row* (1945) and the nostalgic sequel, the rollicking *Sweet Thursday* (1954)

Peak Steinbeck, 1935-1939

- *Tortilla Flat*, 1935
- *In Dubious Battle*, 1936
- *Of Mice and Men*, 1937
- *Grapes of Wrath*, 1939 (Pulitzer Prize)