Exploring the Golden State
A Readers’ Journey Through California History

Thank You Team Fromm!

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Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning at the University of San Francisco

Rough Course Schedule

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

- Intro and Questions (1:00-1:10)
- Steinbeck (1:10 to 1:20)
- John Fante (1:20 to 1:30)
- Hammett & Chandler (1:30-1:55)
- Break (1:55 to 2:00)
- The Exiles (2:00-2:05)
- The Seekers (2:10 to 2:20)
- Science Fiction (2:20 to 2:25)
- Wallace Stegner (2:25 to 2:30)
- Charles Bukowski (2:30 to 2:35)
Peak Steinbeck, 1935-1939

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

- Demoralized by politically-charged readings of his work
- Reactionaries called him a Marxist
- Many on the left called him bourgeois, sentimental

John and Carol Split (1941)
John Leaves California (1942)
Divorce from Gwyn (1948)

Carol and John
Gwyn Conger and John
Ed’s Shocking Death, May 11, 1948

He was never again the writer he had once been in the 1930s

- He got off track
- Years of false starts, distractions
- Paid considerable alimony and child support by writing for magazines
‘To Carol, who willed it’

✈ Many years later, on the eve of Steinbeck’s 1962 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he received a telegram from Carol

✈ “Congratulations,” she wrote. “I always knew that it would come to you someday.”
John wrote back to Carol, telling her he had expected her note. He always knew she was still in his camp in the way that mattered most.

Questions About John Steinbeck?
Why John Fante Matters

- Struggling writer in Depression-era Los Angeles
- Gifted novelist, short story writer
- Best known for *Ask the Dust* (1939)

Fante’s books reveal a forgotten Los Angeles, from Angel’s Flight to the vanished downtown scene.
The Struggles of John Fante

- Scraped by on a series of menial jobs
- Most notable in a tuna cannery
- Grew obsessed with tuna canning

Fante’s Struggles

- Wrote an unpublished story, “Fish Cannery”
- Featured extensive tuna cannery scenes
- A script: *Miracle of the Fishes*, a “melodrama of the tuna fishing industry”
The outline of his unpublished “epic” changed over the years. Then, nothing happened. Fante warned his editor: “DON’T tell Steinbeck!”

The So-Cal Steinbeck, 1938-1940

- Published three well received works
- Novels *Wait until Spring* (1938) & *Ask the Dust* (1939)
- Short stories *Dago Red* (1940)
Fante’s Best:

Ask the Dust (1939)

Ask the Dust
A California classic.
But, because it’s about Los Angeles, and not New York, it’s too often overlooked.
Then, Once Again, Nothing Happened

- Hack screenwriting to support family, cover gambling & bar debts
- Obsessions with golf, pinball, wasted productive years

The Struggles of John Fante

- Compounding woes, he had an anti-talent for book titles
- Proposed calling one “Ah, Poor America!”
- Wanted to title another “Odyssey of a Wop”
As a serious writer, he was forgotten for four decades.

Fante is Enjoying a Renaissance
Los Angeles Poet Charles Bukowski put Fante back on the map

"Fante was my god and I knew that the gods should be left alone..."

Charles Bukowski on John Fante

Questions About John Fante?
Why “Dash” Matters

- Author of iconic “hard-boiled” detective novels and short stories
- Screenwriter & political activist

“Dash” and Film

- Significant influence on films
- Genres of private-eye/detective fiction, mystery thrillers, and film-noir
Many of his novels were set in San Francisco

891 Post Street
Sam Spade’s Apartment
Timing is Everything

- Warner released the “talkie” *The Jazz Singer* (Oct. 1927)
- Henceforth, few silent films would be made
Fiction & Hollywood

- Producers grew desperate for crackling dialogue
- He sent everything to Hollywood, 1928-
- Henceforth crafted filmable plots

Lived in “the real world”

- Suffered decades of debilitating illness, obscurity, poverty
- Went to Hollywood & stopped writing
- Chose to go to prison rather than testify
Raymond Chandler, 1888-1959

- Began writing at 44
- Mostly set in Los Angeles
- *The Big Sleep*, 1939
- *Farewell, My Lovely*, 1940
- *The Lady in the Lake*, 1943
- *The Long Goodbye*, 1954

Chandler Becomes a Writer

- Like many writers, Chandler seems to have been unsuited for any other career
- He tried, and failed, at bookkeeping
- For one, he drank far too much
Chandler’s Work

- If Chandler doesn’t make you love LA, no novelist can
- Critics disparaged him; readers loved him
- Chandler immerses the reader in a vivid, evocative Los Angeles
Chandler Redefined Los Angeles as a *Noir* Place

- Prided himself as the “first to write about Southern California in a realistic way”
- “To write about a place you have to love it or hate it or do both by turns.”

Questions About Hammett and Chandler?
Eugene O’Neill and Carla Monterey at Tao House, Danville, 1937-1943

1. Touch of the Poet, 1939
2. More Stately Mansions, 1939
3. Iceman Cometh, 1939
4. Hughie, 1941
5. Long Day’s Journey Into Night, 1941
6. Moon for the Misbegotten, 1943

Tao House Today, Danville
Theodor Adorno at Berkeley

*The Authoritarian Personality* (1950)
Aldous Huxley in Los Angeles

- Left England, 1937, for Los Angeles
- In LA for 26 years from 1937 (age 43) until his death in 1963 (age 69)

Aldous Huxley

- *The Doors of Perception* (1954)
- Interprets his own psychedelic experience with hallucinogens
Henry Miller at Big Sur, 1944-1963

- Creative new phase; artistic rebirth
- Stayed for 20 years!
- “I get an idea a day here”
- Older, if reluctant, influence on Beats
Productive Big Sur Years

- *Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, 1945
- *Remember to Remember*, 1947
- 3-part autobiography *Rosy Crucifixion: Sexus, 1945; Plexus, 1949; Nexus, 1960*

The Outside World Suddenly Intruded, 1961-1963

- Notoriety meant intrusions, sleeplessness
- Left Big Sur in 1963, moved to Los Angeles
Jack Kerouac: Complicated Iconoclast

- A gentle soul,
  French Catholic,
  reclusive
- Literary pioneer of spontaneous prose

Jack and Gerard
Jack’s “Comeback Novel”

*Big Sur* (1962)

- Unsparingly depicted self-destruction
- Torn between desire for solitude & fellowship
- Protagonist divides time between Big Sur and North Beach

*Big Sur* (1962)

- Harrowing account of alcoholism
- His character seeks salvation
- The real Jack, too
- He died of, at 47, of alcoholism
Why Ray Bradbury Matters

- California’s foremost science fiction writer
- A Los Angeles upbringing
- A Los Angeles fixture

Ray Bradbury

- Characters from marginalized groups
  - Mexican Americans
  - African Americans
  - Gays and lesbians
Why Bradbury Matters

- Concerned about technology and dehumanization
- Staunch defender & advocate of reading
- Technology undermining democratic society

Fahrenheit 451

- Today things are more bleak than he could ever have imagined
- Not necessary to burn books because no one wants to read them anyway
Why Philip K. Dick Matters

Astonishing output: 44 novels!
120 short stories
Largely posthumous fame

*Blade Runner* (1982)
*Total Recall* (1990)
*Scanner Darkly* (2006)
*Adjustment Bureau* (2011)
*Man in the High Castle* (2015)

Recurrent elements:

- Alternate realities
- Predatory corporations
- Authoritarianism
- Perceptions
- Human nature
- Consciousness
- Doppelgängers
**Posthumous Fame**

- Devoted much of his creative energy in the 1950s to a series of realist novels
- None of them published in his time
- Later characterized as equal to Updike & Roth

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**Why Wallace Stegner Matters**

- Novelist, historian, short story writer, environmentalist
- Often called “The Dean of Western Writers”
Wallace Stegner

- Pulitzer Prize, 1972, for *Angle of Repose*
- Controversy requires an explanation

The Prolific Life (and Afterlife) of Charles Bukowski
Why Charles Bukowski Matters

- We can no longer just call him up at his home in LA
- But, before his death in 1994, you could
- He welcomed the interruptions

His poem “462-0614” read like an open invitation:

- “I don’t write out of knowledge. When the phone rings I too would like to hear words that might ease some of this. That’s why my number’s listed.”
An Impish, Self-Effacing Charm

“I get many letters. They often say: ‘Bukowski, you are so f___ed up and you still survive. I decided not to kill myself.’ . . . So in a way I save people.”

Why Bukowski Matters

“So these are my readers, you see? The defeated, the demented and the damned—and I am proud of it.”
Anticipated a Prolific Afterlife

- In 1970, he wrote to his editor: “just think, someday after I’m dead and they start going for my poems and stories, you’ll have a hundred stories and a thousand poems on hand. You just don’t know how lucky you are.”

The Afterlife of Bukowski

- His 1994 death has not impeded his productivity
- He’s been *more* prolific since death
- Ten posthumous poetry collections; more to come
Bukowski Lives On

- Has accomplished something rare:
- A prodigious, totally distinctive, much-beloved body of work
- Something few poets can even dream of

A testament to Bukowski’s enduring popularity:

- At a time when most poetry books can’t be given away, his are annually ranked among those most frequently stolen from bookstores and libraries