

# ENGL-352g: BOOKPACKING NEW ORLEANS

*- a cultural and literary journey*

Maymester Class 2023

Section: 32708

'Bookpacking' classes at USC are immersive experiences in which students read classic and contemporary novels on location. They combine cultural exploration with literary adventure.

This Maymester class offers students the chance to go 'bookpacking' through New Orleans and the bayou regions of Southern Louisiana.

'Bookpacking' is all about cultural connection, using fiction to make empathetic connections with the world around us. New Orleans makes for a wonderful destination for this kind of 'bookpacking' experience because it's so culturally dynamic, formed of a fusion of folk pathways (French, Creole, Cajun, Haitian, African-American, White Protestant) unlike anywhere else in America.

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

The class is led by Andrew Chater, a contemporary educator and award-winning BBC historian who has designed a variety of classes for USC students on the 'Bookpacker' model. Please visit [www.bookpackers.com](http://www.bookpackers.com) for a wealth of content on bookpacking at USC, and [www.andrewchater.com](http://www.andrewchater.com) for more information on the class instructor.

The class is accredited for General Education - all majors welcome.

When May 13 to June 7, 2023 (Maymester 2023)

Where New Orleans / Southern Louisiana

Instructor Andrew Chater [chater@usc.edu](mailto:chater@usc.edu)

Office hours by appointment Fall Semester 2022 - on Zoom

Spring Semester 2023 - THH-426 Tu/Th 11am-1pm

**USC**Dornsife  
*Department of English*

## 'MAYMESTER' CLASSES

'Maymester' classes at USC are 4-unit classes which count towards the Spring Semester load, but which are taken as a continuous block, on location, in the month following Commencement. Maymesters offer students exceptional opportunities for immersive learning in locations across the US and beyond.

There is no extra tuition cost for taking this class; tuition costs are met out of the student's Fall load. But students must pay extra for flights and accommodation (approx. \$2000 on the student bill). You will also pay for your own food during our month on location.

A \$500 non-refundable deposit is due upon student acceptance of a Maymester course. While most spring courses allow for an add/drop period, Maymester courses require immediate commitment due to travel arrangements and budgeting.



## ASSIGNMENTS AND ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

### 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, published 1980)
- A Lesson Before Dying - Ernest J. Gaines (1993)
- Same Place, Same Things - Tim Gautreaux (1996)

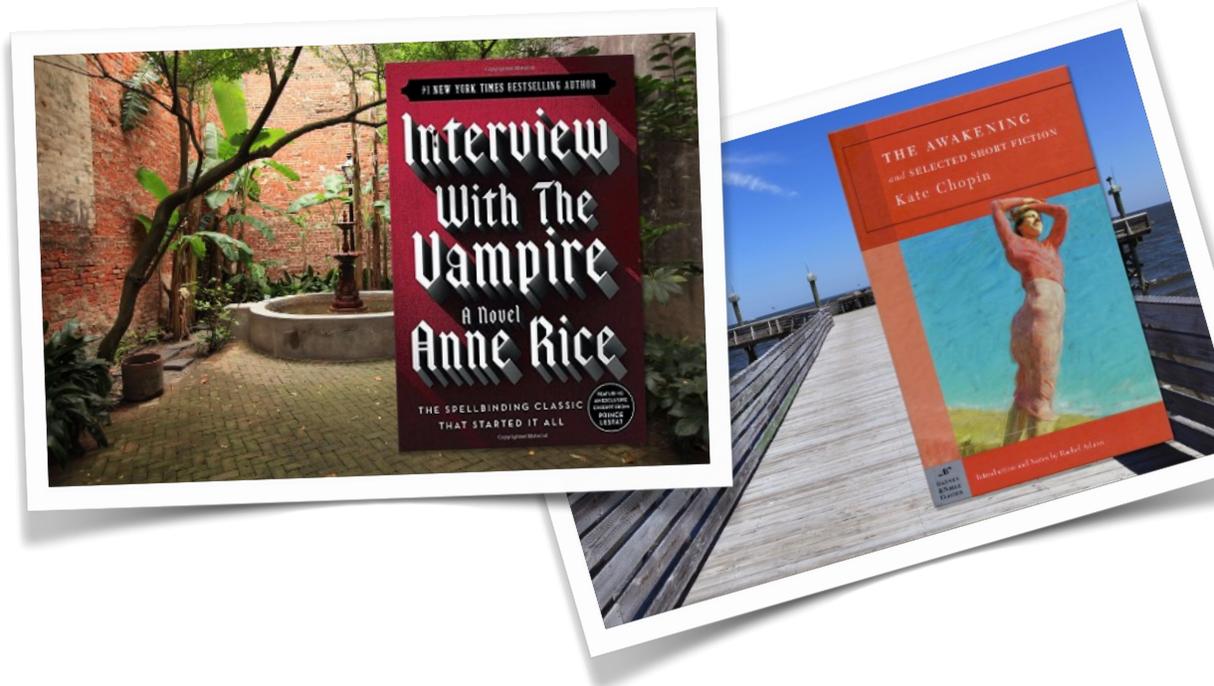
### Assignments

#### Papers

- 2 x academic papers on themes emerging from the novels
- 1250 to 1750 words per paper = 3000 words total

#### Blog Posts

- A minimum of 5 multimedia blog posts, posted to [bookpackers.com](http://bookpackers.com) over our month on location, describing your reflections on our travels from a 'bookpacking' perspective
- Total cumulative blog posts should be approx. 5000 words plus multimedia elements



### Grading

- Paper 1 - 20%
- Paper 2 - 20%
- Blog - 30%
- Discussion in Seminars - 15%
- Participation in field activities - 15%

*More information on the assignments and my grading criteria is given later in this syllabus.*

## SCHEDULE OVERVIEW

Please note that a comprehensive Daily Schedule with all details of seminars, excursions and deadlines for assignments will be distributed to enrolled members of the class in advance of our departure.

Saturday May 13 2023            Travel as a group from LAX to Louisiana

May 13 - 15                      Grand Isle, LA

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.

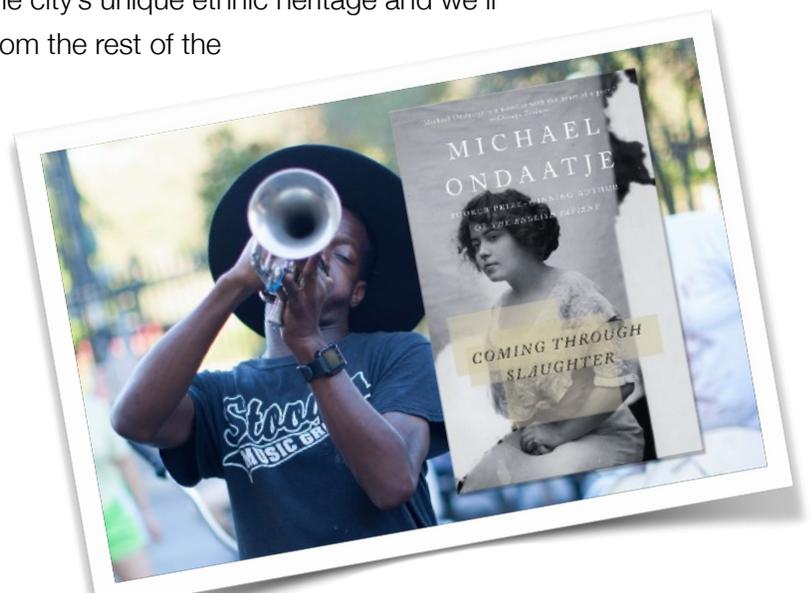
Tuesday May 16                Travel to New Orleans

May 16 - 28                      New Orleans, LA

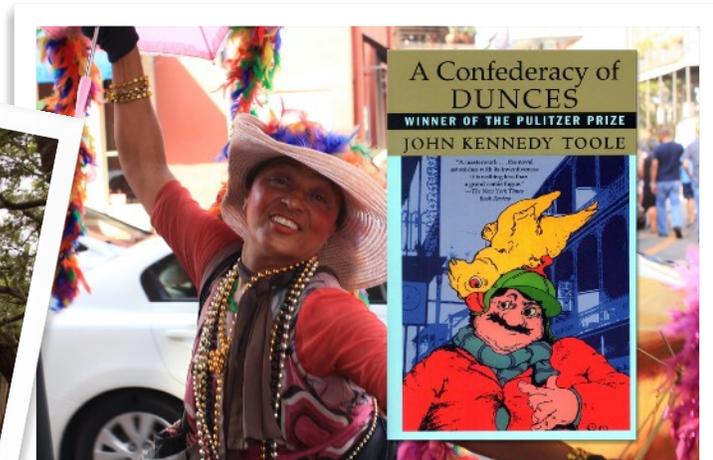
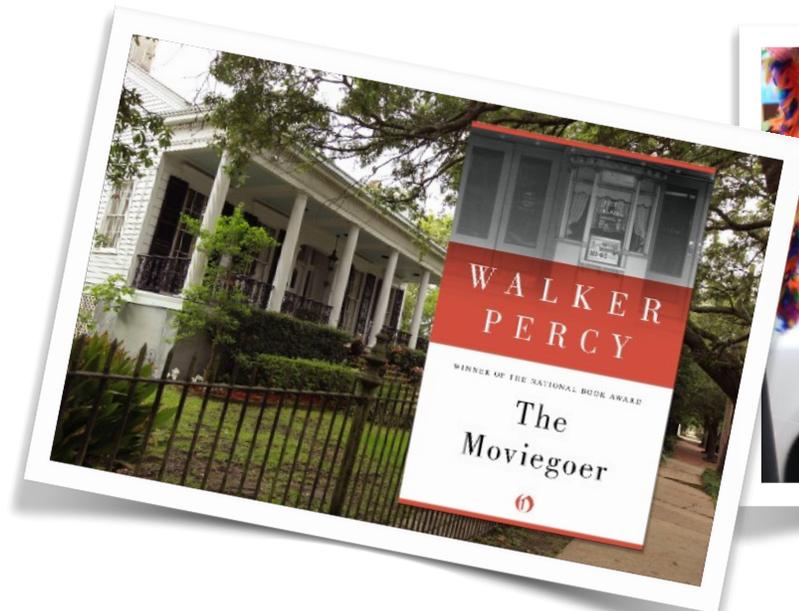
The next 13 days of the course will be spent in New Orleans, staying in a comfortable hotel in the Business District, just a short stroll from the French Quarter. Over this time we will explore the history and culture of New Orleans through a variety of different novels.

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.

Next, we'll read Michael Ondaatje'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 we'll see what sets the cultures of New Orleans apart from the rest of the South. We'll engage with the contemporary debate surrounding Confederate history and the commemoration of the Old South, and 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.



We'll then bring the story into the mid-20th century with a pair of New Orleans novels that have become contemporary classics. The first, Walker Percy's 'The Moviegoer', captures the character of New Orleans as a place of existential yearning. The second, John Kennedy Toole's 'A Confederacy of Dunces' is an inspired comic novel, and simply the best book through which to savor the polyglot, licentious and eccentric atmosphere of modern New Orleans.



Monday May 29

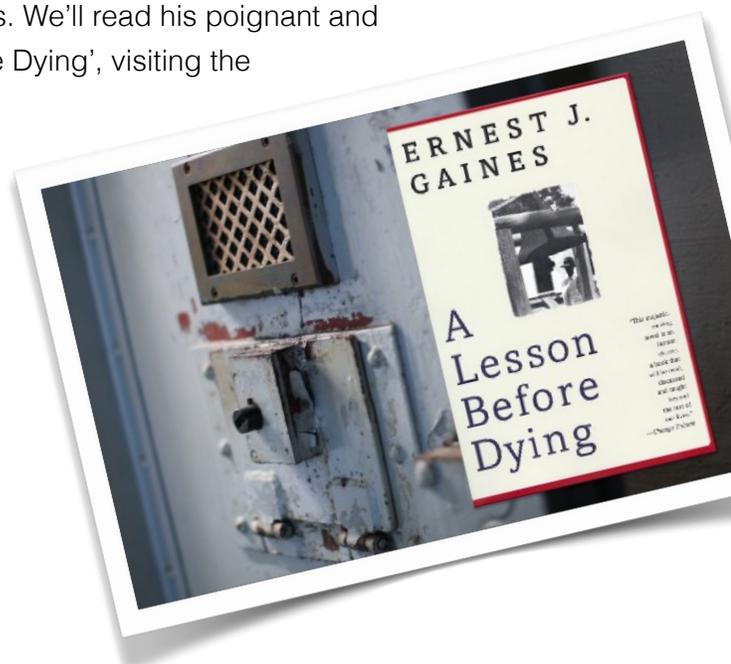
Travel to Baton Rouge

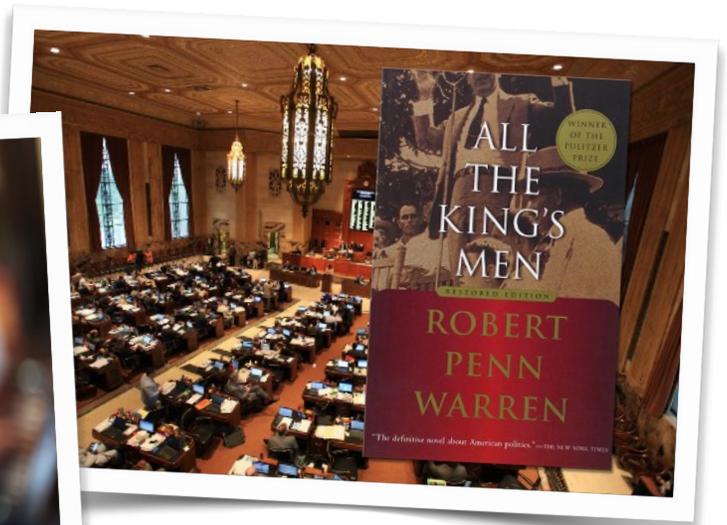
May 29 - 31

Baton Rouge, LA

Based in Baton Rouge, we'll spend two days exploring Pointe Coupée Parish, the birthplace and home of the late 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.

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 retains profound contemporary relevance. 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 1                      Travel to Lafayette

June 1 - June 3                      Lafayette, LA

Our penultimate section of the course - and a real highlight of the experience - 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 4                      Travel back to New Orleans

June 5 - June 7                      New Orleans, LA

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).

Wednesday June 7                      Travel as a group from New Orleans to LAX

*This schedule is subject to change due to weather and other unforeseen circumstances.*

## MORE INFORMATION ON ASSIGNMENTS AND ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

### Participation

The most fundamental requirement on the course is that you are present, and that you participate to the best of your ability.

All the seminars are compulsory, and active participation in the seminars is expected.

All field activities are compulsory except when flagged as voluntary in the schedule, or if excused in advance by Andrew with good reason.

All start times must be adhered to. Don't be the group member that keeps us all waiting.

Whilst out and about as a group, participate. Be curious. Connect. The aim is to discover and explore regional culture. Don't just expect to be spoon-fed. Rather, use your eyes and ears, and engage with the world around you.

Help others in the group do the same; this is a shared group experience, not a competition.

### Reading

Reading all the set books is a prerequisite for taking this class.

Please note:

- '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 '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.

The Daily Schedule - distributed on our departure - includes a key to help you plan your reading. If it says (for example) 'The Moviegoer 3/4', this means, "this is the third day of the four days allocated to read 'The Moviegoer'".

This key is advisory only, but it's important you neither slip behind, nor read too far ahead of the group.

In total, we'll be reading approximately 1200 pages over 26 days, which is 46 pages a day - a pleasure, not a burden - and time will be allocated for this.



## **2x Papers**

Each paper should be 5 or 6 pages long (1250 to 1750 words), double spaced. Please proof-read for clarity, substance, and style.

Papers should be emailed to me in Pdf format. Late delivery may incur a grade reduction.

### Paper 1

- Focus on either 'The Awakening' or 'Interview With The Vampire'
- Write a critical review of your chosen novel

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. Such reviews balance objective criticism with personal reflection. They give the reader both a sense of the book, and what the reviewer 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'.

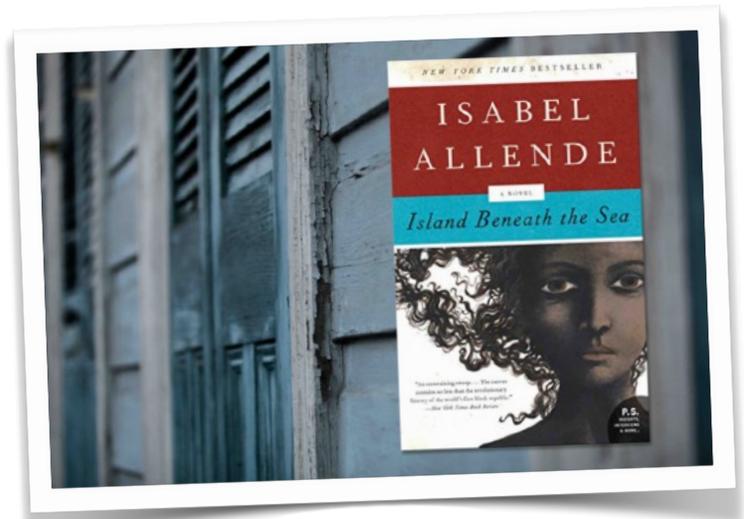
Quote from the text, enough to back up your arguments. Choose interesting and apposite quotes; find the quotes that are really telling and nail what you're trying to say, and to give a sense of the 'reader experience'. Please don't feel obliged to include citations; think more journalistically, and quote 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 artifact?

## Paper 2

- Focus on one of 'Coming Through Slaughter', 'The Moviegoer', 'A Confederacy of Dunces', or 'A Lesson Before Dying'
- Either - Write a critical review of your chosen novel
- Or - Discuss a thematic aspect of your chosen novel

For Paper 2 you can either write another critical review, as per Paper 1, or you can dig deeper into a particular theme that interests you, showing how that theme is developed in the book, and how well you think the author handles this theme. Again, I'm interested in your own thoughts and opinions here - I'm not expecting you to strive for objectivity.



- General notes on Writing Style and 'Voice'

You'll have gathered, from what I'm outlining 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 will differ from that you may be used to with other professors.

But let me reiterate some of 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.

## **Blogs**

Throughout your time backpacking in New Orleans and Southern Louisiana, you will be writing and posting blog items to a dedicated blog portal at Bookpackers.com.

During our time in Grand Isle, I shall give you all access codes for your personal blog page. It's simple to use, but very stylish. You can upload

- Text
- Quotes (from the various novels)
- Photos, either individually or in galleries, with captions
- Video or audio, if you wish (not compulsory)

As the course progresses, you'll learn how to make your blog more attractive, with banner pics, thumbnails, maps and so forth.

The blogs will remain hidden until you have all uploaded your first blog posts (approx 6 days into the course). At this point the page on the website will go 'live', and we will share the blog address with friends and family, and (if you wish) link them to your social media profiles.

You should upload a minimum of five posts over the course of the journey, but you may find a steady stream of shorter posts is more your style. I have put a suggested pattern of blog postings (six in total) into the schedule, but you need not adhere rigidly to these suggestions.

The blog posts should be directly related to the experience of backpacking. This is the key difference between the papers and the blogs; whereas the papers will focus on your relationship with the texts / books, the blogs will focus on places, through the prism of the text. We will talk about this distinction more during the first few days of the course.

In total, your final combined blog pieces should contain a total of somewhere between 5000 and 6000 words. If you are inventive with other media, you may wish to rein back on the word count - but please ensure your blogs have substance, and deliver your impressions of the "backpacking" experience.

If you want some inspiration as to what is possible, feel free to visit [bookpackers.com](http://bookpackers.com) and read some of the blog posts I have written in my own travels as a bookpaker - for instance, here: <https://www.bookpackers.com/master-feed/2018/5/24/searching-for-buddy-bolden>. These posts, I hope, demonstrate how it's possible to combine travel journalism, cultural exploration and literary reflection into one interweaving package. Please note, they are unashamedly personal; they reflect my thoughts and feelings. It may be a challenge for you to shake off the rigid and objective academic style that is expected of you as students - but I'm inviting you to delight in a looser, more personal and journalistic approach. Enjoy it!

Examples of blogs from the 2017-2022 Maymasters can be seen here: <https://www.bookpackers.com/new-orleans>



## COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

The practical objective of this course is to reach a critical and empathetic understanding of the eclectic cultures of Los Angeles. What are the particular characteristics of the city and of its people, and what makes it different to other cities of the US? How was this distinctive character forged, and how has it evolved over time?

The course offers an exciting and unconventional approach to the study of Literature. The idea behind 'bookpacking' is to use novels as guidebooks to place and people, as much as for their literary value. It shows how the study of text can interact with the real world. This is truly a cross-humanities course, weaving together literature, history, geography, politics and social studies - a holistic form of study which will push students to think in surprising ways.

The course is immersive - half in the classroom, half 'on the road'. Immersive study involves a different set of learning parameters - logistically, academically and pedagogically. It involves physical and personal interaction with places and with people. It involves an element of journalistic inquiry. It encourages and necessitates respect for the environment. And it can provoke a more active sense of understanding and empathetic reflection than can be achieved, we believe, in a purely academic context.

The assessment elements of this course - especially the blog and 'special project' - have been tailored especially to encourage these elements of empathetic reflection.

### Other 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

### Computer Policy

In this class you are invited to take notes in your book and in a notebook. Please do not use an electronic device (computer, phone, iPad, etc.) to take notes, unless you have a documented disability that requires it (in which case, please provide me with this notification).

### 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. Faculty and staff must report any information regarding an incident to the Title IX Coordinator who will provide outreach and information to the affected party. The sexual assault resource center webpage <http://sarc.usc.edu> fully describes reporting options. Relationship and Sexual Violence Services <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp> provides 24/7 confidential support.

### 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](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. Dornsife provides a full range of mental health resources, which can be found at <https://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling/>

### COVID Safety

Students are expected to comply with all aspects of USC's COVID-19 policy. Failure to do so may result in removal from the class and referral to Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards.

### Support Systems

#### *Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call*

- [studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling)
- Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

#### *National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call*

- [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)
- Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

#### *Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press "0" after hours – 24/7 on call*

- [studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault)
- Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

#### *Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)- (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298*

- [equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://titleix.usc.edu)
- Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

#### *Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298*

- [usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care\\_report](http://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report)
- Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity |Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

*The Office of Student Accessibility Services - (213) 740-0776*

- [osas.usc.edu](http://osas.usc.edu)
- Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

*USC Campus Support & Intervention - (213) 821-4710*

- [campussupport.usc.edu](http://campussupport.usc.edu)
- Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

*Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101*

- [diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)
- Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

*USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call*

- [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)
- Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

*USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call*

- [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu) Non-emergency assistance or information.

*Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)*

- [ombuds.usc.edu](http://ombuds.usc.edu)
- *A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.*

*Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice - (323) 442-3340*

- [chan.usc.edu/otfp](http://chan.usc.edu/otfp) or [otfp@med.usc.edu](mailto:otfp@med.usc.edu)
- *Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.*

## **BEHAVIOR / DISCIPLINARY ISSUES**

Throughout the course, students will be expected to behave as per campus rules.

You are ambassadors for USC throughout the duration of the course - even during 'free time' - and your behavior should reflect this.

The course leader will pass any behavioral issue on to the Associate Vice Provost, Student Affairs. Any serious breach of conduct will result in dismissal from the course.

**Adjustments to this Syllabus may be made during the course of the semester.**