

Fall 2025
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City on Fire: Los Angeles in 1939

Course description

This course will focus on Los Angeles in 1939, an extraordinary time in the city's history. We will consider that year under four aspects: film, literature, politics, and organized crime.

That year was a high-water mark in American film history. Despite the depths of the Great Depression, the Hollywood studio system produced *Gone With the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Stagecoach* (with a young actor named John Wayne), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* with Jimmy Stewart, and many others. We will review Hollywood's history and make sure we understand why the studios were doing so well in the late 1930s.

The vitality of the city's literary scene was closely related to Hollywood's success. Many accomplished writers, including F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner, had moved to Los Angeles to write screenplays, and many continued to write fiction. In 1939 alone, their books included Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, John Fante's *Ask the Dust*, and Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*. Also during this time, many German expatriates found refuge in Los Angeles, creating what one scholar later called Weimar on the Pacific. Some wrote fiction, while others, like Bertolt Brecht, tried to break into the movie business.

As the Second World War began in earnest, many in Los Angeles, including British and German expatriates, watched the rise of fascism in horror. But the big story in local politics was corruption and reform, and unofficial corruption was widespread as well. During the 1930s, the Chicago outfit infiltrated a major Hollywood labor union and extorted the studio heads.

We will explore how film, literature, politics, and organized crime commingled and then burned brightly in Los Angeles before the Second World War. We will pay special attention to the figures and works that best capture this incandescent mix of talent, fast money, corruption, and vice.

Schedule

Week One: Course overview and the Hollywood studio system in the 1930s.

Week Two: The literary scene, including major works and figures.

Week Three: International and local politics, including corruption, investigations, and reforms.

Week Four: Organized crime in and around Los Angeles.

Suggested reading and viewing

Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* reflects many of the major themes we'll explore in this class.