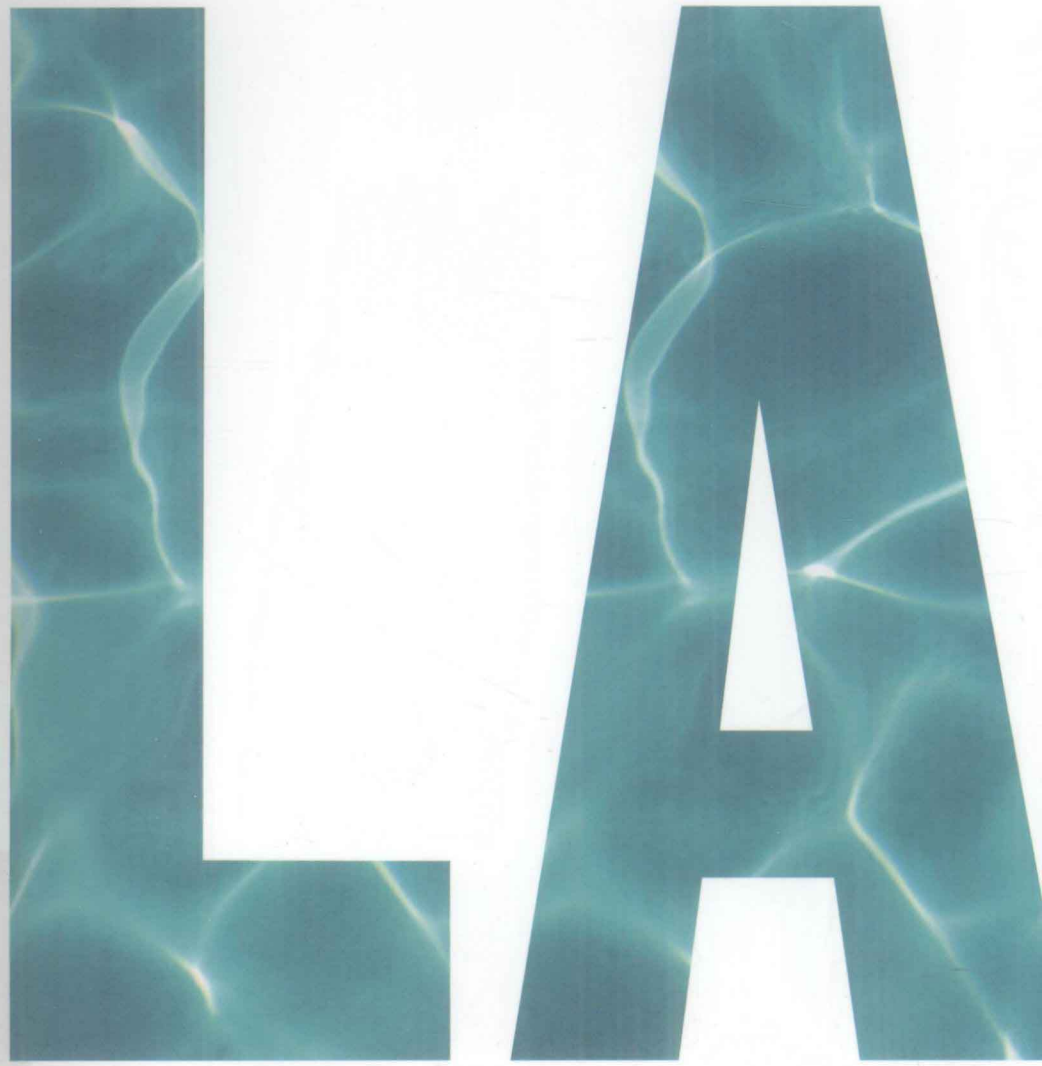
Writing Los Angeles

A Literary Anthology

EDITED BY DAVID L. ULIN



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Introduction

Los Angeles is not a new city. Established in 1781 as a Spanish pueblo, it is nearly as old as the United States, and like America's, its history is one of self-invention. As the historian Kevin Starr has written, it did not so much evolve as will itself into being. Originally a tiny settlement—as recently as 1844 barely three thousand people occupied the "Los Angeles District," which at the time extended from the San Fernando Valley into Orange County—it briefly became the capital of Mexican California under Governor Pío Pico. During the Mexican War it was the site of several battles. After California entered the Union in 1850, L.A. incorporated as a U.S. city, and with the completion of the first transcontinental railroad spur lines in the 1870s, its identity as a quintessentially American promised land began to take shape.

Starting with the real-estate boom of the 1880s, during which its population nearly tripled, Southern California became a huckster's paradise. "From 1900 to 1920," the pioneering historian and social critic Carey McWilliams wrote in *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land,* "Los Angeles was essentially a tourist town. Like most tourist towns, it had its share of freaks, side-shows, novelties, and show-places. Ducks waddled along the streets with advertisements painted on their backs; six-foot-nine pituitary giants with sandwich-board signs stalked the downtown streets; while thousands of people carrying Bibles in their hands and singing hymns marched in evangelical parades." This period peaked with the Long Beach oil boom, which inspired more than one and a quarter million new residents to move to Southern California during the 1920s before the bubble burst when the Julian Petroleum scandal shook the region. This massive stock fraud debacle, just two years before the onset of the Great Depression, did much to tarnish Los Angeles's public image and to usher in a more disillusioned era.

If L.A. has often seemed like a city without history it is perhaps because so much of its past has been recycled into myth. As early as the 1880s, inspired in part by Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel *Ramona,* civic boosters and real estate promoters began to dissemi-

nate a legendary version of the mission era. The period of Hispanic rule was a pastoral world where a cultured Spanish elite lived in civilized luxury on *ranchos* cultivated by Indian laborers. This was the beginning of a long tradition of nostalgia for the good old days in Southern California. The mission legend spread widely, and has lingered tenaciously; its influence can still be found in art and architecture, street names, even public spaces such as Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles, a Mexican marketplace that purports to offer visitors an authentic taste of the old pueblo, although it was actually created in 1930 as a tourist site.

The successive boom periods and the region's rapid commercial development encouraged the development of such mythologies. It was all part of a remarkably successful sales campaign to spur investment and settlement, a campaign that used phrases like "America's Mediterranean" to extol a climate at once mild and invigorating, and that idealized Southern California as a place where, in Charles Dudley Warner's phrase, "nature seems to work with a man, and not against him." The thousands who flocked to L.A. in response to such descriptions saw it as a place where they would find whatever they were looking for, and where in turn they could reinvent themselves, leaving the past behind. The earliest selections in this book—which include Helen Hunt Jackson gently reminiscing about the mission days and Stewart Edward White and Harris Newmark commenting from different angles on the freewheeling hype of the boom period—show the roots of a literature that would blossom in the 1920s and 1930s.

The emergence of Los Angeles as a modern city owes much to two developments: the relocation of the motion picture industry (previously centered on the East Coast) to Southern California and the purchase in 1904 of vast tracts of the San Fernando Valley (largely worthless land at the time) by a syndicate comprising the *Los Angeles Times*'s Harry Chandler and other local leaders. The land deal would ultimately yield over $100 million in profits because of the purchasers' secret knowledge of a plan to irrigate the arid Valley with water hijacked from the Owens River Valley, a few hundred miles to the north. Without that Owens Valley water, Southern California could not have spread out far enough to require the network of roads and freeways that made it possible for the city's car culture

to take hold. As for the movie business: well, it's impossible to imagine what the Southland would have been like without it. Cars and movies, after all, are the essential icons of Los Angeles, emblems of speed and light and movement; but they also reside at the heart of our national mythology, and this is perhaps why Los Angeles has come to occupy such a singular place among American cities, a symbol of the country's most expansive dreams and its most streamlined technologies. This quintessentially twentieth-century metropolis was to prove an irresistible subject for a startlingly diverse group of writers.

The movies contributed in a more direct way to the literary culture embodied in this anthology: they encouraged the arrival of writers, thousands of them, who began to flood Southern California in the 1920s, looking for work in film. Much has been made over the years of Hollywood's role in the evolution of Southland culture. For the poet Vachel Lindsay, in his 1915 book *The Art of the Motion Picture,* movies represented a new American art form, one that would make Los Angeles a kind of Athens of the modern age. Other writers were more typically inclined to see Hollywood as a commercial behemoth swallowing everything in its path. In any event the film industry transformed the region by offering paying work to a wide variety of writers from elsewhere. For these newcomers, L.A. was exotic territory, full of outsized ambitions and outsized fantasies, a funhouse mirror offering grotesquely exaggerated reflections of America itself. If, prior to the motion picture era, Los Angeles literature had been provincial, based on local iconography and the glories of a half-imaginary past, the writing of the 1920s and 1930s focused on the freaks and side-shows that Carey McWilliams described, displaying L.A.'s most eccentric curiosities and evangelical excesses for a national audience. "Here," wrote Bruce Bliven in *The New Republic* in 1927, "is the world's prize collection of cranks, semi-cranks, placid creatures whose bovine expression shows that each of them is studying, without much hope of success, to be a high-grade moron, angry or ecstatic exponents of food fads, sun-bathing, ancient Greek costumes, diaphragm breathing and the imminent second coming of Christ."

Bliven was not the first and far from the last outsider to write about Los Angeles in such terms. As recently as 1960, in "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," Norman Mailer could note, "One gets

the impression that people come to Los Angeles in order to divorce themselves from the past, here to live, or try to live in the rootless pleasure world of an adult child"—a comment that has the same quality of generalizing condescension as Bliven's statement of a quarter century before. In the first half of the twentieth century, Los Angeles writing can be seen as dominated by the accounts of those who arrived from elsewhere. This is still true, in some ways, although the new immigrants to L.A. come not from other parts of the United States, but from Latin America and the Pacific Rim, a transformation reflected in works like Garrett Hongo's *Volcano* or Sandra Tsing Loh's "Coming Home to Van Nuys." But as the city has developed, it has become less a place people *go to* than one they *come from,* and by now there have been several generations of Los Angeles–born writers who don't see the city as exotic and have focused less on the ephemeral and carnival-like aspects of L.A. life than on its more enduring qualities.

The story of Los Angeles has always been, on the most basic level, the story of the interaction between civilization and nature. Mary Austin's early essay "The Land" delineates in unblinking detail just how unforgiving is the desert ecosystem on which the city was superimposed. As Lawrence Clark Powell's *"Ocian in View"* and Gary Snyder's "Night Song of the Los Angeles Basin" indicate, L.A. continues to be an idiosyncratic hybrid of the urban and the elemental, a metropolis carved from desert and ringed by ocean and mountains, whose pure, flat light (described so eloquently by Lawrence Weschler in "L.A. Glows") can lend a deceptively tranquil quality to an environment where uncontrollable forces remain at work. There is a geographic instability that may prefigure some of the emotional and social instability that has so often provided subject matter for Los Angeles writers; in a landscape where nothing can be certain, there is the inevitable feeling that anything goes. In "Fire Season," Joan Didion ponders this fluidity by suggesting that to live in Los Angeles is to do a constant dance with a disaster-prone environment. The same notion surfaces in John McPhee's "The Control of Nature" and, to some extent, in Cedric Belfrage's historical novel *Promised Land.* Raymond Chandler's "Red Wind," with its memorable opening description of the Santa Ana winds

and their effects on people—"Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks"—is as ominous an encapsulation of L.A.'s relationship to the elements as has ever been written.

"Red Wind" also figures here as a representative slice—early but very choice—of the work of Raymond Chandler, a writer who in his day looked like a better-than-average pulp writer but who now seems more like the inventor of a mythic Los Angeles and the progenitor (with his predecessor Dashiell Hammett) of a school of noir writers who have flourished everywhere but most especially in L.A. Chandler's mix of clipped description, aphoristic wisecracks, and disappointed romanticism came together with the hardboiled, hard-luck Depression-era mood of writers like James M. Cain to spawn one of the signature modes of L.A. writing, which would evolve and flourish in the work of Ross Macdonald, Walter Mosley, and James Ellroy (all of them featured in this book). The disillusioned, world-weary sensibility of Chandler and his successors is of course not limited to crime fiction; in the same year that Chandler's first novel, *The Big Sleep,* appeared, two other masterful books—John Fante's *Ask the Dust* and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*—explored similarly dark territory, dismantling the glittering promises of the dream city and finding unsettling realities underneath. In the decades since, a comparably disillusioned sensibility has marked the work of writers as different as Chester Himes, Joan Didion, Gavin Lambert, and Robert Towne. As Carolyn See put it, "Southern California bespeaks alienation. The West Coast is the end of the road for the American Dream. We're up against a blank wall out here, and we can't go any farther. So even if you get what you want, then what? There is no out, you're here. It looks good, but that's it."

One of the corners of L.A. culture where noir has nestled deepest is Hollywood. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, *film noir* was a genre charged with creative excitement, and a host of noir writers, from Cain and Chandler to David Goodis and Jim Thompson, found gainful employment in the industry. Noir provided a gritty counterweight to the dreamier aspects of the movies' fantasy life, a corrective to the endless happy endings promised by celebrity and glamour. For writers in general, noir or otherwise, the relationship

with Hollywood has always been complicated and often conflicted. Authors like William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Tennessee Williams could hardly regard their film assignments as anything but a commercial sideline distracting them from their real work, and European emigrés like Bertolt Brecht were often inclined to see themselves as exiles in a vulgar marketplace. Yet all these writers also found unique material in the Southland, and as the excerpts in this book from the diaries of Christopher Isherwood and the memoirs of Salka Viertel indicate, the intellectual scene was far from barren. The movie writers also had the inestimable advantage of being able to observe the dream factory behind the scenes, and those hidden machinations and power struggles fired the imaginations of writers as different as Nathanael West, Budd Schulberg, John O'Hara, and Horace McCoy. The Hollywood novel, a genre pioneered by the brothers Carroll and Garrett Graham in their long-lost 1930 satire *Queer People,* evolved into a vibrant form of L.A. writing, one that in its fatalistic cynicism is a kind of literary cousin to noir crime fiction.

The rediscovery of a book like *Queer People,* with its scabrous portrait of a vanished Hollywood, has been one of the great pleasures of editing *Writing Los Angeles.* It is satisfying to be able to reclaim, for instance, a piece like James M. Cain's "Paradise," published in 1933 in *The American Mercury,* a surprisingly mellow take on Los Angeles by a writer better known for depicting its harsher side. It is even more satisfying to juxtapose the elements of a book like this and to see how the often conflicting angles of vision work together to form a portrait of a constantly changing, always surprising city. There is a strand of homegrown social criticism that runs from Louis Adamic to Mike Davis, by way of such distinctive voices as Carey McWilliams and Joan Didion; there are those who, like Reyner Banham and David Hockney, have celebrated Los Angeles without apology; and there are those who, like Carol Muske or Charles Bukowski or Wanda Coleman, have brought to life the close-up details of lives often hidden from public view. In a city where myth-making is an industry, L.A.'s writers have often felt the need to resist imposed narratives, preferring to carve out their own version of reality, no matter how fragmentary.

I wish this book could have been even longer than it is; there are certainly many significant Los Angeles writers whom it wasn't possible to include, whether for reasons of space or because their writing doesn't deal directly with the city. The handful of excerpts from novels in these pages can only scratch the surface of a long tradition that includes Myron Brinnig's *The Flutter of an Eyelid,* Steve Erickson's *Days Between Stations* and *Rubicon Beach,* Rudolph Wurlitzer's *Quake,* Peter Viertel's *In the Canyon,* Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry,* John O'Hara's *Hope of Heaven,* and Horace McCoy's *I Should Have Stayed Home.* An anthology like this can only hint at the cumulative density of Los Angeles's literary record; it is intended as a starting point for exploring the rich and diverse perspectives of a century of writing. I hope that at the very least it will spark a recognition of just how variously Los Angeles can be reimagined, in ways that go far beyond the commonplaces of movies and guidebooks.

No anthology on this scale can be the work of any one individual; throughout the long months of its preparation, I've been blessed by the assistance of a wide range of interested parties, both in Los Angeles and beyond. For their input and suggestions, I'd like especially to thank to Stephen Cooper, Rae Dubow, David Fine, Lynell George, Erik Himmelsbach, David Kipen, Bonnie Nadell, Tom Nolan, David Reid, Susan Salter Reynolds, Richard Schickel, Carolyn See, Kevin Starr, and Louise Steinman. I feel a special gratitude to the Rare Book Room of the Los Angeles Public Library, where I spent a dozen or so mornings reading my way through nearly seventy years of *Westways* magazine, a search that not only yielded M.F.K. Fisher's delightful essay "Pacific Village," but also offered a rare and unexpected window onto Southern California as it is and as it was.

David L. Ulin
Los Angeles, 2002

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Helen Hunt Jackson

When Helen Jackson (1830–1885) published her novel *Ramona* in 1884, she wanted to draw attention to the suffering and exploitation of California's Indians at the hands of rapacious white settlers. Jackson, a native of Amherst, Massachusetts, and a close friend of Emily Dickinson, had become interested in the American West following her marriage to a Colorado banker. *Ramona*—which is where the literary culture of Los Angeles really begins—did indeed make a tremendous impact, but not as a political tract: it was Jackson's nostalgic evocation of the Spanish mission era, a supposedly halcyon time marked by unspoiled nature and a social order characterized by beneficent dons and noble, hardworking Indians, that caught the public's attention. For many decades, the novel's afterlife extended into place names, tourist souvenirs, advertising campaigns, and a celebrated annual pageant in the town of Hemet. In "Echoes in the City of the Angels," first published in *The Century* in 1883 and later reprinted in *Glimpses of California and the Missions* (1902), Jackson devotes her considerable literary gifts to a similarly soft-focused account of the surviving traces of the original Los Angeles, which were beginning to fade into the past even as she wrote: turning history into an elegant pastoral fable, she makes the present into something like the aftermath of a dream.

from

ECHOES IN THE CITY OF THE ANGELS

The tale of the founding of the city of Los Angeles is a tale for verse rather than for prose. It reads like a page out of some new "Earthly Paradise," and would fit well into song such as William Morris has sung.

It is only a hundred years old, however, and that is not time enough for such song to simmer. It will come later, with the perfume of century-long summers added to its flavor. Summers century-long? One might say a stronger thing than that of them, seeing that their blossoming never stops, year in nor year out, and will endure as long as the visible frame of the earth.

The twelve devout Spanish soldiers who founded the city named it at their leisure with a long name, musical as a chime of bells. It answered well enough, no doubt, for the first fifty years of the city's