

SHOWCASE

The California Story-Unabridged

An ambitious anthology reinterprets the Golden State's heritage.

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2002

READING TIME 6 MIN



Tony Sollecito

by Barbara Tannenbaum

California's vast literary output has long been a favorite source of anthologies. But no previous collection resembles *The Literature of California: Writings from the Golden State*. At 633 pages, the first volume (UC Press, 2000) is only half the behemoth project; the second is scheduled for release in January 2004. Beyond the book's sheer heft, it virtually redefines California literature.

The editors—UC-Davis English professor Jack Hicks and noted authors James D. Houston, Maxine Hong Kingston and Al Young—take a more sweeping view of the state's literary landscape than previous anthologists. They go back to the earliest narratives of Native Americans, for example, and include 19th-century women pioneers and anonymous Chinese immigrants alongside household names like Steinbeck and Saroyan.

East-to-west migrants are ubiquitous in California fiction, but according to Houston, MA '62, a 1966-67 Stegner fellow, the editors envisioned California as a fulcrum of the Pacific Rim. With this perspective, they sought out stories of people who came north from Mexico and Latin America or sailed eastward from Asia—as well as the oral tradition of indigenous peoples.

"We wanted to bring to Californians the fullest literary map that we could," says lead editor Hicks. "We were interested in anyone who was engaged with the life, the culture or the history of California and reflected that not in a single essay but in a body of work. Their point of origin wasn't as important."

Kingston, author of *Woman Warrior* and a visiting writer at Stanford in 2000, describes their decision making. "We had to ask ourselves, do we include Robert Frost, who was born in San Francisco but mined the landscape of New England for his poetry? Do we leave out Los Angeles resident Ray Bradbury because his most famous work takes place on Mars?" The answer in both cases was no.

Sci-fi might appear to defy regional attribution but, Hicks observes, "California has always been an improvisational culture. It goes back to the Gold Rush, when people arrived with precious few of the institutions that regulated civil life in the East: jurisprudence, churches, religious community, an educational system. This had not only a historical impact but an artistic impact."

Young, a 1966-67 Stegner fellow who taught creative writing and literature at Stanford from 1969 to 1976, elaborates. "If you live in an area where you feel there are few boundaries, it's quite possible that your imagination will soar," he says. "That's why it makes sense to include fantasy and science fiction writers in an anthology rooted in California."

Such thinking led to interesting choices. L. Frank Baum, author of the Oz series, was born in New York and made Kansas the birthplace of his heroine, Dorothy. Yet in 1910, as the editors explain, Baum moved to Hollywood, where he lived and wrote until his death. Their selection from *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz* (1908) opens with a train from San Francisco arriving late, due to the 1906 earthquake.

Not everyone is comfortable with such inclusiveness. Steve Wasserman, book editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, says, "It seems a commonplace that certain writers inescapably reflect a sense of place. . . . But [thinking ahead to Vol. 2] is Czeslaw Milosz a California poet? No, I would argue, he is a world-class Polish poet who was washed up on the shores of the San Francisco Bay Area by the tempests and turmoil of the 20th century." And yet, as Hicks notes, Milosz has also created a significant body of work on life in California.

The new anthology caps a reconsideration of the American West that arguably began with the first volume of state librarian Kevin Starr's *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915* (Oxford University Press, 1973). Literary journalists and academics branded as "new Western historians" added momentum in the mid-'80s. These writers rejected Frederick Jackson Turner's widely accepted 1893 "frontier thesis." Turner defined the story of the West as one of an advancing, homogeneous frontier "tamed" by the virtues and characteristics of triumphant individuals. He ignored indigenous people, local culture and native history.

"The public is finally ready to hear a more complicated story about California," Starr says. "If you go back and revisit the Sixties-era reportage by *Colliers*, *Life* and *Look* magazines, you'll read wonderful articles that convey a sense of this state as an alternative place, different from the rest of America." But, he argues, "social upheaval and a spate of natural disasters in the last few decades" made people reconsider the state's appeal.

Indeed, Young says that when he studied with the late Walton Bean at UC-Berkeley, "one of the first things he taught us was that outside of the American South, California has the most profound legacy of social violence in the United States. Given that California is a place that's thought of as a paradise, you must also presume its opposite."

Today, Starr says, the public has a greater appreciation for the dark side. He points to parallels with the South. "No Southern writer talks about escaping to Mississippi where everything is going to be wonderful. If you read Faulkner, you do so to discover the complexity of the past."

However, just when this new anthology is showcasing a wider spectrum of California literature than ever before, there are signs of growing national indifference to regional literature. The book garnered numerous awards and rave reviews inside the state but has gone unsung outside—except in England's *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Guardian*. On the other hand, Southern literature remains a national favorite.

"The South as a literary phenomenon is part of the national identity," Starr says. "Make no mistake: it has been canonized. California, as an instance of American civilization, has not."

It is tempting to chalk that up to the East Coast establishment's historic neglect of West Coast writers. Wallace Stegner lamented that in moving to California, he felt like he'd "receded over the horizon and disappeared." *San Francisco Chronicle* book critic David Kipen complains that the New York-based Modern Library's century-end list of 100 noteworthy books mentions only about four titles from writers west of the Mississippi. However, as recently as 1995, California anthologies gained critical attention nationally. It seems more likely that media conglomeration is the culprit, as fewer national outlets report on local and regional trends.

"The larger perspective is that we are all in danger of becoming provincialized," says Starr. "We don't belong anywhere. We read *USA Today* or the *New York Times* and begin to define ourselves with an emerging national media matrix. American intellectual life has been provincialized as a result."

Author Tobias Wolff, head of Stanford's creative writing program, has a different take. Asked to comment on the new anthology, he demurred. "Regional fiction doesn't interest me as a question. To the extent that Western fiction is self-consciously Western or Southern fiction is self-consciously Southern, I'm not interested. I am much more concerned with the individual writer, her province of mind, the moral and intellectual atmosphere of the character through whom the writer is seeing the world."

Hicks strongly disagrees: "How can you separate literature from evocation of place?" he demands. "What is James Joyce without his Dublin? Faulkner without Mississippi? Saul Bellow without Chicago? To equate the regional with the provincial is to dismiss the major brushstrokes on the American canvas."

There is a parallel erosion of regionalism in the art world. Stephanie Barron was lead curator of "Made in California," a huge millennial exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Like the anthology, it aimed to reveal the ups and downs of the California experience. Barron says that 20 years ago, such a show would have "descended into mere boosterism." But she doubts it could be staged 20 years from now.

"We are becoming so global that the local is in danger of being eviscerated," she says, noting that for the 1980 to 2000 portion of the exhibition, "It was harder to tease out something that was specifically Californian as opposed to hot topics that were being addressed internationally as well."

Stanford assistant English professor Nicholas Jenkins, who teaches a freshman seminar on California literature, takes a British-born outsider's stance. "I would be very skeptical of any attempt to minimize California's importance as a region," he says, calling the state a "vanguard" both in this country and abroad. "What happens here is a kind of test case both for the future and for our understanding of the past."

Jenkins recognizes the predicament of trying to reinterpret the past in a culture that is rapidly changing in its self-understanding and demographics. California, he says, is "well on its way to becoming a different place in the future. It makes one realize that no single book could ever sum up this state. California will always defy definition."

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