Course Description:

Crime literature featuring an amateur or professional detective or the police and speculating on both modus operandi and motives of criminals emerged in the 19thC with stories by Edgar Allan Poe and further developed with the contributions of such authors as Arthur Conan Doyle and then, in the so-called Golden Age of crime writing before World War II, in the works of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers and others. In the U.S., largely regarded as a response to the “locked room” mysteries in the British tradition, there emerged “Hard-boiled” detective or “noir” crime fiction writing, sometimes adopting the perspective of the criminal rather than the private eye or the homicide detective. This course will focus primarily on crime fiction in the hard-boiled or noir tradition that takes place in the Los Angeles or greater Southern California setting from time of the Great Depression to the transformed post-World War II urban environment of commercial and residential sprawl. We will sample some essays on the import of this southern California setting and its historical transformation, but primarily read a selection of short stories and novels by a diversity of writers, many of whose works have been translated into classic “noir” films. We will discuss this variation of the crime genre and its conventions and evolution, and how through the plots and setting crime literature provides us with an index to social issues and human psychology as well as larger economic transformations.

Possible Required Texts:


James M. Cain, Double Indemnity

Raymond Chandler, The Big Sleep or The Long Goodbye

Dorothy Hughes, In a Lonely Place  [Note: we will also discuss the film version of this novel]

Walter Moseley, Devil in a Blue Dress

James Ellroy, The Black Dahlia

James Sallis, Drive

Nina Revoyr, Southland

Requirements: reading quizzes; short (2-3 page) biweekly responses to readings; final exam over concepts and themes.