

JONAH RASKIN

## Genius Loci

The strange alchemy of California's literary shrines

As the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, California poet and essayist Dana Gioia was an evangelist for California literature. Now he's taking a different approach to spread the good word about the state's rich, though often underappreciated, literary heritage.

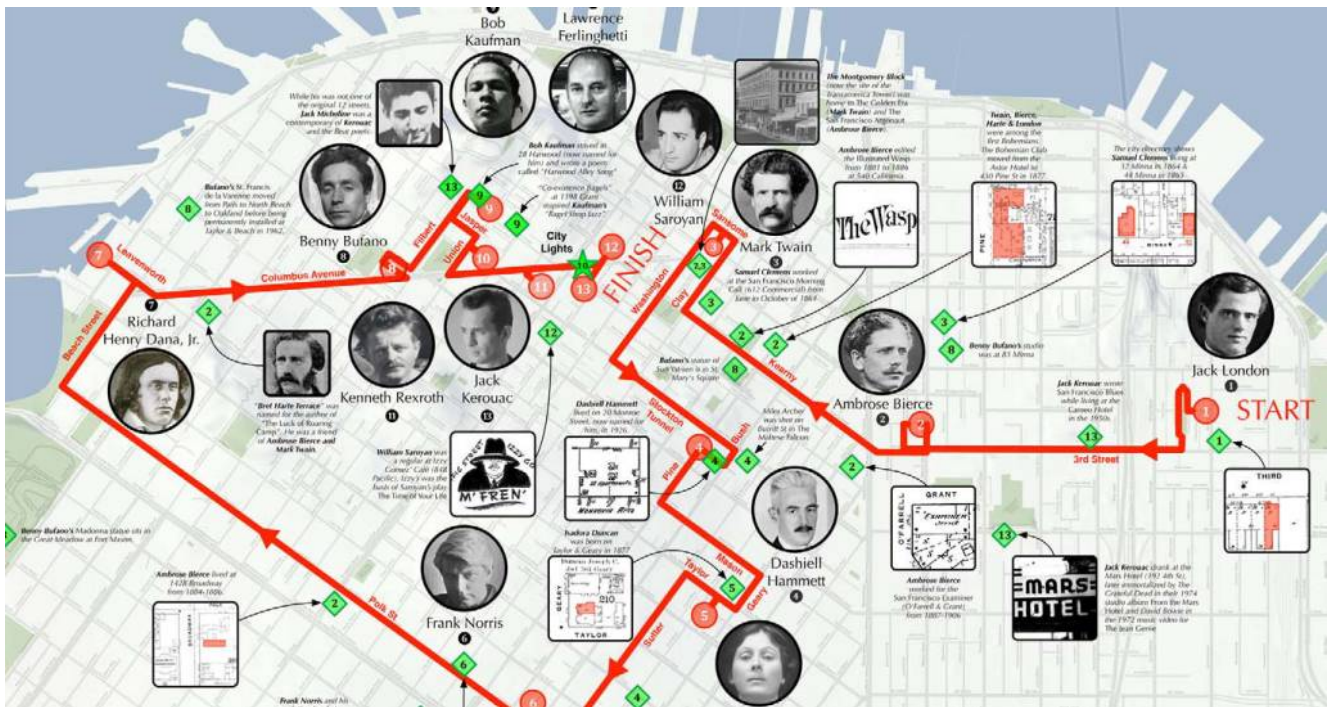
"We need literary shrines as much as, if not more than, any other place," he told me. "They can provide tangible evidence of the literary past that's eroding and serve as institutional storehouses for the collective national memory of our writers, their lives, and their work. Tourist bureaus in California underestimate the power of the imagination. They don't do all they could do to preserve our cultural heritage."

The best literary shrines do more than honor literary heroes of previous generations. They're also places where their work can find new life, new relevance, and new readers. They can speak to the present and even the future as much as the past. They can also work a strange sort of magic when the spirit of a book and readers from around the world come together in a place once enlivened by an author. In the process, readers, books, and places rejuvenate one another and combine to form new wholes.

Visiting shrines is an occupational hazard I've long accepted and even embraced as a writer. I haunt dead writers, visit their graves, walk the neighborhoods they once inhabited, poke around their homes, and peer into their offices. For an afternoon or an evening, I feel that I have communed with the poets, playwrights, and experimental fiction writers who intrigue me. I also tangle with the spirit of books that keep me up late at night, turning the pages of noir novels, adventure stories, and California epics. Everywhere I turn in California, I find a literary landscape: in the town of Twain Harte—named for Mark Twain and Bret Harte—near Yosemite; in the Henry Miller Memorial Library in Big Sur; and in Eugene O'Neill's Tao House not far from Danville where the playwright and his wife Carlotta lived in the 1930s and where he wrote many of his best dramas.

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Detail from *Bikes to Books*, by Nicole Gluckstern and Burrito Justice.

Gioia is spot-on when he insists that California can and should do more to honor its literary genius loci—the home of *The Land of Little Rain* author Mary Austin, in Independence, cries out for visitors—but we’re doing pretty good already. A cottage industry in literary maps of San Francisco and Los Angeles has sprung up, each one expanding the list of minor shrines and the number of potential pilgrims. We have our major shrines, too. All year long, locals and travelers from far away descend on Jack London State Historic Park in Glen Ellen, the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, and the Beat Museum in San Francisco.

Literary tourism in California has a history that stretches back more than a century. In 1884, Helen Hunt Jackson published her wildly popular novel *Ramona*, and fans came to Southern California from far and wide to soak up the romanticized atmosphere they found in the book. Towns fought over which one had truly inspired the author—the better to lure tourists—while others created shrines at her heroine’s imagined birthplace, wedding site, and burial plot. For decades, it was as if the whole region became a literary shrine to California’s imagined past.

Literary shrines to American authors first became popular in New England a decade after the first wave of *Ramona*-fever. Theodore F. Wolfe described the fabled world of Thoreau,

Emerson, and Margaret Fuller in *Literary Shrines: The Haunts of Some Famous American Authors in 1895*. California shrines in that restrained New England mold began to appear on the tourist trail not long afterward. In the inaugural issue of *California Magazine* published in January 1915, the editor, E.J. Wickson, emphasized the Golden State’s fledgling cult of the author. Everywhere he looked, Wickson saw “numerous artistic and literary shrines,” though he complained, “the searcher is called upon to make a pilgrimage down some half-hidden by-path, or to go delving into the musty archives of the past.”

Things have changed greatly since 1915, although it’s still possible to make pilgrimages down half-hidden paths at Jack London State Historic Park in rural Glen Ellen, which draws literary tourists from around the world. The ruins of Wolf House, built for the Londons but destroyed by fire before they moved in, are still the main draw, although the museum at the House of Happy Walls, as well as the author’s grave, see a steady stream of visitors, too. While generations of American schoolchildren know London best for his adventure stories, the politics that infused so much of his work have garnered him many fans in translation abroad, particularly in Russia. If visitor numbers and sheer enthusiasm are anything to go by, that second kind of reader

seems to have developed a much deeper, keener connection to London.

“There’s an international Jack London cult,” Jeff Falconer, who grew up a devoted London fan in the East Bay and is now a devoted docent, told me on a recent visit to the park. Eugene Birger, a native-born Russian and now a Sonoma County resident speaks perfect Russian to the tourists from Moscow and Kiev who make the pilgrimage to Glen Ellen. He’s almost always on hand.

Falconer and Birger regale visitors with the story of a Soviet diplomat who arrived in a chauffeur-driven limousine one night in the 1960s, toured the grounds under cover of darkness, handed out caviar to show his appreciation, and then returned to San Francisco undetected by authorities. To fulfill the dream of a lifetime, Alexander Solzhenitsyn made a pilgrimage to the park in 1976, one hundred years after London’s birth. Two decades later, Dr. Vil Bykov—the twentieth-century’s foremost Soviet authority on London—spent a week there. “Paradise,” he called it in his memoir, *In the Steps of Jack London*. At the annual banquet sponsored by the London Foundation, he told the crowd: “Jack London is an integral part of Russian culture.”

A Romanian visitor recently pointed to London’s 1908 dystopian novel, *The Iron Heel*, as though it offered the latest news of her own country. A dignified traveler from India, a turban wrapped around his head, explained to a docent that he’d grown up in Kolkata reading London’s books. After visiting the House of the Happy Walls, he took the hand of his guide and kissed it.

Almost all of the docents describe the exuberant Russians who walk to the small plot of ground where London’s ashes are buried, bow their heads reverentially and shed tears. The power of the London shrine, however, does not work on all visitors equally. Falconer told me, “I remember a group of Russian and American tourists that provided a study in contrasts. Two young Muscovites took turns filming at Jack’s grave. They might have been gangsters. They certainly dressed the part. One of them looked down at the ground then up at the camera and shouted, ‘I’m right here where the greatest American writer is buried.’ The Americans watched flabbergasted. I’ve never seen a single US tourist do anything like it.”

Russians brag about their devotion to London and sneer at Americans who fail to appreciate the one and only god of California literature. In part, the Russians who come to

Sonoma are carrying on the adoration that their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents expressed for London. Perhaps it’s this deep, multigenerational wellspring of feeling that makes the Sonoma shrine so powerful to its Russian visitors.

The National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, which opened its doors to the public in 1998, draws a much different crowd. The center has tried and failed to attract tourists from Russia. Japan, more than any nation in the world, save the United States, sends waves of reverential readers who stray now and then from familiar roadside attractions to pay their respects to the author of *The Red Pony*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, first published in 1939 and translated into Japanese after World War II.

Susan Shillinglaw knows much of *The Grapes of Wrath* by heart. A Steinbeck expert at San Jose State University and the author most recently of *On Reading Grapes of Wrath*, she views Tom Joad, the Oklahoma ex-con turned California visionary, as the quintessential twentieth-century American literary rebel. Tom Joad could be an inspiration for the world’s “square people,” says Shillinglaw. Indeed, she sees him as an icon and a hero for the crowds in Beijing, Cairo, Istanbul, and Hong Kong, who gather in city squares to confront illegitimate authority. So far, however, the “square people” have not showed up en masse at the Steinbeck Center.

Phillip Saldana, who grew up in Bakersfield and who read John Steinbeck’s novels as a young man, keeps all the relevant data on visitors. They do not come from China, Egypt, Turkey, or Russia, he tells me, although you’d think perhaps Salinas might attract visitors from Moscow, Kiev and Volgograd (then called Stalingrad), cities that Steinbeck visited and wrote about in *A Russian Journal* in 1948. Steinbeck avoided much of the clichéd Cold War thinking that enveloped American writing about the Soviet Union, but he also supported the Vietnam War, and that may have cost him his Russian readers.

Colleen Bailey, the director of the National Steinbeck Center, sees Steinbeck’s appeal closer to home in Salinas and Monterey, rather than Moscow. As a young girl, she read *Of Mice and Men*. Then in high school she acted in a stage adaptation of *East of Eden*. In the pages of Steinbeck’s fiction, she found defiant characters who encouraged her own rebelliousness. In 2014, to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of *The Grapes of Wrath*, she and

the staff at the center went on the road and retraced the Joad family's odyssey. A videographer filmed the journey that began in Sallisaw, Oklahoma, and ended in Bakersfield. Along the way, Bailey interviewed farmers, housewives, businessmen, and students, and she learned that Steinbeck's words can still wound readers in the places where he wrote and that he wrote about.

The Texas-born, San Francisco-based, award-winning playwright Octavio Solis joined Bailey on the trip from Oklahoma and found himself transformed by the journey, communing with the ribbon of Steinbeck's literary shrine that runs for fifteen hundred miles. On the road, Solis read a few pages of *The Grapes of Wrath* each night until he finished the book. The journey led him backward and forward in time and in space and inspired him to write a play called "On the Mother Road." He's at work on another drama in which a descendant of Tom Joad returns to Oklahoma and in the era of global climate change finds signs of yet another Dust Bowl. "Does he become his own worst boss?" Solis asks. "Is he a good grower or is he cruel to his workers? And what is life like in Eastern Oklahoma?" As a dramatist, he finds powerful theatrical elements in nearly all of Steinbeck's work as well as characters who speak to him as though they're alive today.

"I had long thought of Mexican farm workers as today's Okies," Solis told me. "But that idea didn't hit home until I met a dark-skinned man in Weedpatch, California, who had worked in the fields, read *The Grapes of Wrath*, and saw himself as the reincarnation of Tom Joad." One of the poorest towns in all of California, Weedpatch was perhaps the perfect location for Solis to find Steinbeck's novel as vital as it had been when it was first published. Indeed, in Weedpatch, California, the seventy-five-year-old book came to life again.

Solis's literary allegiances stretch beyond Steinbeck. Born in 1956, the same year that Ginsberg's *Howl* was published and a year before Kerouac's *On the Road* appeared in print, he feels linked to the Beat Generation writers. You might find him at City Lights Bookstore or at Vesuvio's or Tosca's in North Beach. "City Lights is a major shrine and so is Tosca's," Solis said. "I've always felt an affinity with Kerouac because he was a wild spirit influenced by jazz and because he wanted to break down boundaries."

Jerry Cimino, the founder of the Beat Museum in North Beach, and a former executive at IBM and American

Express, was inspired by the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas. He remembers lunch with Kim Greer, the center's CEO, who told him, "A Beat Museum ought to be big. You've got multiple greats: Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Corso. You've got jazz, rock n' roll, the sixties, and nonconformists through the ages. It could be huge." Greer's prediction has come true.

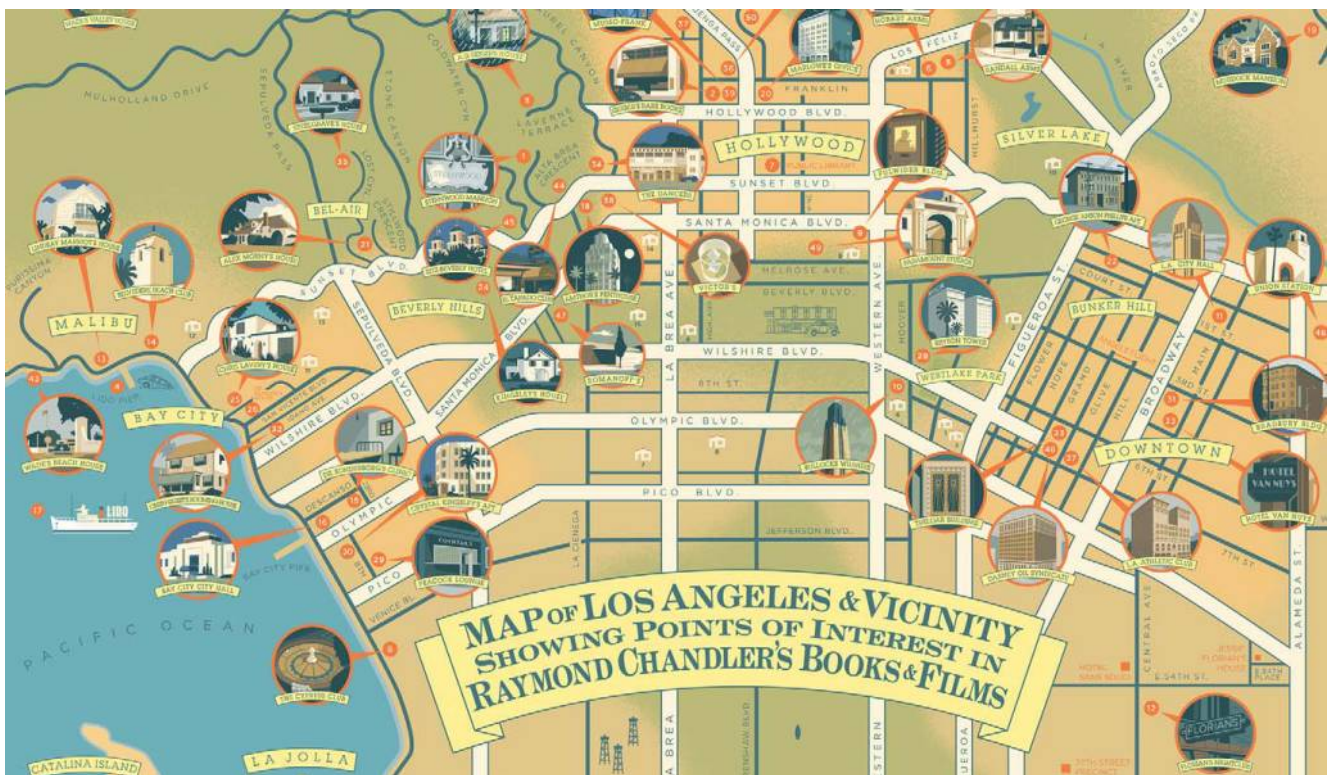
Cimino runs the Beat Museum out of a spacious two-story building that looks out on a cityscape with cultural capital. While almost all of the visitors to the Steinbeck Center come from northern California, the Beat Museum draws an international crowd that has learned about the Beats from recent films such as *Howl* (2010), *On the Road* (2012), *Big Sur* (2013), and *Kill Your Darlings* (2013). According to Cimino, twenty- and thirty-year-olds come to the museum from all across the United States and from Vietnam, Ukraine, New Zealand, China, and Germany. "I've learned from them that the Beats are timeless, that they exemplify youth, and that they've helped to foment rebellion around the world," Cimino told me.

In 2014, he hired Noemi Sornet, a twenty-one-year-old French videographer, to document the cultural diversity of the visitors to the Beat Museum. Born and raised on the west coast of France, Sornet read *Sur la Route* at sixteen. She first came to Cimino's attention when she stormed a screening of Walter Salles's cinematic version of *On the Road* at the Cannes Film Festival, and later when she launched a website that collected reflections from Kerouac readers around the world. It was a global valentine to the author.

"Reading *On the Road* was a freeing experience," Sornet told me. "At sixteen, when I finished the novel, I wanted to write and also to come to America. Working at the Beat Museum has been a dream come true. I've met sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds from Brooklyn, Montreal, and San Paolo. We all belong to the Kerouac cult."

Did she feel that French responses to the Beats differed from American responses? "I don't want to speak for everyone," she said. "But I think the French are less puritanical than many Americans, less shocked by the Beat use of drugs, and less judgmental about their sexuality, though in San Francisco almost everything goes. Yes, there are differences, but I think that *On the Road* expresses the universal feelings of youth."

Ea Oerum, a Danish journalist, toured literary San Francisco in the winter of 2014, but she didn't catch fire until she



Detail from the Raymond Chandler Map of Los Angeles by Paul Rogers. [www.herblester.com](http://www.herblester.com)

arrived in Los Angeles. For three weeks, she wandered from Beverly Hills to Bunker Hill, taking notes, interviewing residents, and writing about LA for her readers in Denmark. She went home, unpacked, repacked, and returned to her newly adopted haunts. On her second visit to California, she stayed nine weeks.

More than any other LA writer—more than James M. Cain, John Fante, and Raymond Chandler—it was Charles Bukowski who fascinated Oerum. Bukowski's streets became her shrine, although their seediness seemed anathema to the very notion of a literary shrine. Born in Germany in 1924 and brought to the United States as a child, Bukowski published more than one hundred books that have long been appreciated more in Europe than in the United States, at least until recently. Oerum made a pilgrimage to Bukowski's grave at Green Hills Memorial Park and with friends observed the anniversary of his death at King Eddy Saloon, the self-proclaimed "finest watering hole on Skid Row."

Richard Schave, the founder of Esotouric—which offers literary tours billed as "adventures into the heart of LA"—brought Oerum into Bukowski's world of drunks, derelicts, college professors, and intellectuals in the City of Angels.

A perfect guide to the world of Bukowski, Cain, Chandler, and Fante, Schave is a native Angeleno. He eats, sleeps, drinks, and thinks like a character in a noir film circa 1945, or perhaps more like a noir director, say Billy Wilder. Schave's literary map of LA is recognizable to readers who have been raised on Bukowski, Baudelaire, and Brecht, German expressionists and French film critics, who gave the word "noir" to Hollywood's downward-spiraling narratives about criminals, grifters, insurance salesmen, and waitresses who commit murder for love and money.

And in the end what can a pilgrimage do to the pilgrim?

It has turned a Danish woman into an Angeleno. "I love Bukowski's LA," Oerum told me. "I love the way that he gives humanity to people in the gutter. I'm sorry I wasn't there to meet him in person. I wish I might have met more of the kinds of Americans that he writes about in *Ham on Rye*," my favorite Bukowski book.

And it has made an Angeleno something else entirely. "I haven't adopted a European view of the city per se," Schave told me. "But I share with European artists and writers a peculiar view of LA that's not exactly American and not entirely European, either." **B**