

# L.A. Noir – Studies in Mystery Fiction

Ms. Callie Webb

[cwebb@immaculateheart.org](mailto:cwebb@immaculateheart.org)

**Office Hours:** By appointment at break or lunch

**Location:** Administration Bldg

## Course Description

This semester course explores the multi-faceted culture of Los Angeles through the genre of mystery fiction. Students will take a closer look at literary works in which detectives roam as knights errant on familiar city streets, uncovering corruption, moral ambiguity, and greed, but ultimately finding truth and redemption. With a review of historical events, crime stories and film noir, the course's literary journey combines classic tales with contemporary fiction, including works by emerging women writers. Students will explore universal themes and archetypal characters while discovering "whodunit" in this fascinating urban landscape.

## Academic Content Standards

*The primary goal of the English department is to help students communicate effectively in both written and spoken English. Upon graduation from Immaculate Heart High School students will:*

1. Read critically and recognize literal and implied meaning in varied and complex classical, contemporary, and multicultural texts, assigned and independently selected.
2. Write coherent and focused essays that convey a well-defined perspective and tightly reasoned argument. The writing demonstrates students' awareness of audience and purpose. Students progress through the stages of the writing process as needed.
3. Write clearly and use formal conventions of the English language: grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, sentence structure, word choice, paragraphing, and figurative language.
4. Speak effectively and employ formal and informal conventions of the English language that are appropriate to a variety of purposes and audiences.
5. Respectfully discuss topics, evaluate alternative points of view, and recognize questions and issues raised in the works they read.
6. Recognize trends and developments in literature as an art form, including literary movements, styles, and conventions.
7. Find, evaluate, and synthesize information for specific purposes, using a variety of properly cited sources.
8. Apply knowledge of word origins to determine the meaning of new words encountered in reading materials and use those words accurately.

## Benchmarks and Performance Standards

*Students who have successfully completed L.A. Noir – Studies in Mystery Fiction will be able to:*

- Analyze and discuss mystery fiction as a mirror to Southern California and its diverse culture.

- Analyze and discuss the development of mystery fiction in relation to historical events in Los Angeles.
- Identify, analyze and discuss the main elements of literary works (point of view, setting, characterization, plot, theme, and mood.)
- Identify, analyze and discuss elements of noir, including themes and archetypal characters.
- Identify, analyze and discuss specific elements of mystery fiction, including structure, narrative voice, and suspense.
- Develop a plot for a mystery story, storyboard a scene with dialogue, and write the first chapter, based on the study of course material.
- Recognize emerging trends in mystery fiction as a genre, including styles, conventions, and the female protagonist.

## Required Materials

The English Department requires that you bring to class before the end of the first week of school **your own unmarked copies** of all the texts listed here. You must also ensure that you purchase the **specified edition** of each text. Please consult the Varsity Books for each book's ISBN --- an identifying number that will help you distinguish between different editions of the same text.

### IH L.A. Noir Course Reader

#### IHHS Student Writing Handbook

*Double Indemnity* by James M. Cain

*The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler

*The Last Embrace* by Denise Hamilton

*Little Scarlet* by Walter Mosley

*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Seventh Edition*

Blue or black pens

Paper

3-ring binder or folder for taking notes and filing papers

Composition notebook (preferably college-ruled)

**\*\*It is imperative that you bring your supplies and the text that we are studying every day!\*\***

## Classroom Expectations

- **Participation:** Daily, active participation in class discussion provides you – as well as the rest of the class – incalculable benefits. Please refer to the English Department rubric for class discussion to understand what is expected of you. Your final grade in this class may be raised ½ a grade for excellence in this area. It may be lowered ½ grade for deficiency.
- **Assignments:** All assignments must be completed on time for credit and to pass this class. Late work will receive **zero** credit.
- **Make-Up Work:** If a student is absent, it is **the student's responsibility** to find out what work was missed and how to make it up. You can consult my webpage for all assignments and classroom work covered. Please keep unnecessary absences to a minimum. If you have a legitimate need for an extension on an assignment, please see me before the due date and we will work something out.

- **Academic Integrity:** Plagiarism is the *intentional or unintentional* use of someone else’s WORDS or IDEAS without giving proper credit. This includes paraphrasing a source without giving due credit. See your Student Writing Handbook for an exhaustive discussion of this matter. As you know, plagiarism is a serious breach of academic integrity and any assignment containing plagiarism earns a zero.
- **Test Return Policy:** English teachers keep summer reading tests, vocabulary tests, and objective final exams so that assessment questions are field tested and can be revised when necessary. This practice allows the department to reuse most parts of an exam for comparison of achievement from year to year and to adjust the emphasis of instruction when required. Students may access their past tests by making arrangements with their teacher.
- **Honor Code:** At all times, students are expected to adhere to and respect the school’s Honor Code. On all your work, your name affirms your honor.
- **Other classroom rules:** Students should be seated in the classroom when the bell rings. No food or drinks (with the exception of water) are allowed in class. Students are expected to follow all school rules and regulations as outlined in the Immaculate Heart High School Student Handbook, as well as exhibit mature and appropriate behavior.

## Types of Assignments

- **Writing:** You will write various out-of-class expository essays. You will work on various projects and presentations that involve writing. All essays must be word-processed and include a *properly formatted works cited/consulted page*. Please refer to the English Department rubric for essays for a more detailed understanding of what is expected of you.

You must upload all essays and any other specified assignments to the website: [www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com). You will need to set up a user profile using a valid email account. You will also need the appropriate class ID number and enrollment password designated for your class period. **You must upload all your written work to Turnitin or you will not receive credit for your work.** Keep the digital receipt you receive to prove you uploaded your work.

| Period | Class ID | Enrollment Password (case sensitive) |
|--------|----------|--------------------------------------|
|        | 3345491  | marlowe                              |

- **“A Closer Look” Project:** Students will explore and write about a section of Los Angeles after completing a walking tour of historic downtown buildings and neighborhoods. From this tour, students will develop the basis for their own story’s Los Angeles setting.
- **Creative Project:** Students will develop narrative sketches for their own mystery story in Los Angeles. They will storyboard a scene, with dialogue, in noir style, and write the first chapter.
- **Final Exams:** In addition to the written midterm and final, students should expect a cumulative objective response final during the last week of the semester. Be sure to take thorough notes throughout the semester to help you prepare.

## Grading Policy

Grades are computed on a point system with, for example, essays worth 100; quizzes, between 5-25; projects, between 20-80; and homework, between 5-20. The semester grade will be computed by equally weighing the two quarters and the final exam. As noted above, participation can raise or lower this grade by one half (e.g., B to B+ or B-).

### Grading Scale

|           |          |          |          |        |
|-----------|----------|----------|----------|--------|
| 98-100 A+ | 87-89 B+ | 77-79 C+ | 67-69 D+ | 0-59 F |
| 93-97 A   | 83-86 B  | 73-76 C  | 63-66 D  |        |
| 90-92 A-  | 80-82 B- | 70-72 C- | 60-62 D- |        |

## Course Chronology:

Depending on the progress we make, some works may be omitted or, if time permits, some may be added. You will be informed when or if any changes are to be made to the course schedule.

### Elements of Noir:

- Early noir myths, “The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice” and “The Death of Orpheus” as told by Ovid and also graphically presented by Neil Gaiman.
- “Number 19” by Naomi Hirahara
- *Double Indemnity* by James M. Cain
- “Mulholland Dive” by Michael Connelly
- Hollywood & the American Dream
- Movie: “Double Indemnity”

### Elements of Mystery Fiction:

- “Twelve Notes on the Mystery Story” by Raymond Chandler
- “The Tooth of Crime” by James Ellroy
- Fingerprints and Forensics
- Movie: “L.A. Confidential”

### Detective Stories

- The first detective story – “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” by Edgar Allan Poe
- *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler
- Character studies: The Detective as Knight Errant, The Detective as Tragic Hero, Femme Fatales and other Criminal Minds
- Excerpt from “The Simple Art of Murder” by Raymond Chandler
- Moral Ambiguity vs. Moral Reasoning
- *The Last Embrace* by Denise Hamilton
- Movie: Scenes from “The Big Sleep,” “Who Framed Roger Rabbit?” and “Blade Runner”

### Los Angeles as Character

- Excerpt from *Little Sister* by Raymond Chandler
- Walkabout – Docent-led tour of historical Los Angeles
- “The Golden Gopher” by Susan Straight
- Review of a city’s notoriety in crime and scandal, including historical events as Zoot Suit Riots and 1992 Los Angeles Riots
- “Once More, Lazarus” by Hector Tobar
- View “Twilight in Los Angeles”
- *Little Scarlet* by Walter Mosley
- Movie: “Devil in a Blue Dress”