

## The 1930s

### Kansas Humanities Council

### TALK Series

We have all seen the pictures, the indelible images: long lines of heavy-jacketed people waiting for handouts in breadlines, or crowding counters hoping for a job; the careworn visage of the Okie mother with her hungry children huddled around her; the milling crowds in front of closed-down banks; the ramshackle shacks of the Hoovervilles that sprouted in American cities; the dustbowl cloud descending on the Plains town; stark images of the hungry, the unemployed, the neglected. “Brother, can you spare a dime,” the song goes (1931; lyrics by Yip Harburg, music by Jay Gorney), summarizing the despair of the Depression era.

For American history, the 1930s – or, to broaden it a bit, the slightly-more-than-a-decade that ran from the stock market crash in October 1929 to American entry into World War II after Pearl Harbor in December 1941 – was a pivotal, critical era. In the early years of the decade, a range of fundamental challenges confronted the nation. The Great Depression, with all its ramifications – the stock market crash, unemployment over 25%, bank closings, collapsing world trade – dwarfed previous boom-and-bust cycles. The Dust Bowl demolished the security of agricultural life on the Great Plains. The struggle over Prohibition and the intensified criminality that the ban on alcohol brought to the streets (for which Al Capone stood as the emblematic figure) challenged law and order in ways that Prohibition’s repeal in 1933 could not resettle. Radicalized politics on both right and left – fascist sympathizers and revitalized nativists on the one hand, against a more powerfully organized socialist/communist left than America had ever seen on the other – undermined the security of democratic institutions. On the radio airwaves that then provided the dominant form of mass culture in the period, shows like *Amos and Andy* shared the airwaves with the anti-Semitic broadcasts of Reverend Charles Coughlin. Overseas, the path toward war, both in the expansionist aims of Nazi Germany in Europe and the incursions of imperial Japan on the mainland, was growing increasingly clear.

And yet the later years of the decade are equally remarkable for the ways America mapped a route out of the crisis. After Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s victory in the presidential election of 1932, he responded to the economic meltdown by initiating the New Deal, featuring both the creation of a system of social welfare to ease the problems of those most hurt by the depression (the unemployed, the retired, and the poor) and direct government intervention to re-energize a damaged economy, ranging from reopening banks and reorganizing agriculture to government job creation to stimulate the economy. State job creation in the era included such things as dam building (including the Tennessee Valley Authority’s wide-ranging projects) and other infrastructure work, but it also featured government promotion of the arts, including government-sponsored post-office murals, the subsidized record-making of photographers and oral historians, and government grants to theatres like that of Orson Welles. The Roosevelt administration came to new terms with organized labor, pioneered new forms of market regulation and subsidies for home-building, electrified farm homesteads for the first time through the Rural Electrification Act, and even developed new ways to communicate to the population in Roosevelt’s famous “fireside chat” radio broadcasts. By the advent of World War II, America’s economy had recovered sufficiently to engage in a full-scale global conflict.

The thirties were also a period of remarkable artistic efflorescence across the full spectrum of arts. In Hollywood, the decade that began with the sound revolution and moved quickly to embrace new color technologies featured a new growth of film genres within the studio system. The classic Hollywood musical, the screwball comedy, the gangster film, major studio horror movies (*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *Wolf Man*), and animated films (including Walt Disney’s first work) all got their start in the decade, while established genres like the Western continued to flourish. The socially engaged visual arts of the decade found expression in Social Realist work, parallel to Soviet art of the era, and the rise of regionalist painters like Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton, both trends broadly

assisted by federal sponsorship through the Work Progress Administration. The circumstances of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl provoked significant progress in documentary photography, with the emergence of such figures as Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, and Walker Evans. Musical forms, especially those rooted in the fusion of African-American music with mainstream culture – the blues, jazz, swing – continued to develop. And the literary output of the decade ranged from works that captured the conditions of the era, like the novels of John Steinbeck or Erskine Caldwell, to new African-American voices like Richard Wright, to continued production by America’s “Lost Generation” expatriates, to the invention of the hard-boiled detective and the style that would inspire film noir in the work of such writers as Dashell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

## **BOOKS IN THE SERIES**

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[www.emporia.edu/cgps](http://www.emporia.edu/cgps)

### ***All the King’s Men (1946) by Robert Penn Warren***

Robert Penn Warren was above all else a novelist, but he thought of his work as a sort of history as well. As he writes in *All the King’s Men*: “And what we students of history always learn is that the human being is a very complicated contraption and that they are not good or bad but are good and bad and the good comes out of the bad and the bad out of the good, and the devil take the hindmost.” The devil in question here is Huey Long, the notorious Louisiana governor who provided Warren a model for Willie Stark, whose tragic arc from impoverished idealistic beginnings to corruption, bullying, and fall the novel traces. 661 pp.

### ***The Day of the Locust (1939) by Nathanael West***

“It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh,” declares Tod, the narrator of Nathanael West’s ferociously savage Hollywood satire, a tour of the tawdry that survive in the shadows of the Hollywood star-making machine. Tod is a painter, but his Hollywood work is background and costumes; like most of the other characters he encounters, aspiration rather than achievement defines him. His main work, however, a painting called “The Burning of Los Angeles,” invokes the apocalyptic mode, foreshadowing the novel’s violent climax. 126 pp.

### ***Mules and Men (1935) by Zora Neale Hurston***

In her introduction to *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston recalled: “I was glad when somebody told me, ‘You may go and collect Negro folklore.’” The permission came from Franz Boas, the pioneering anthropologist with whom Hurston studied at Barnard College. Her collecting trip took her back to her home territory of Florida, and to central Southern sites of folk life in Louisiana and Alabama. And the resulting book, Hurston’s first, established the territory she would continue to explore in both fiction and non-fictional forms, the shaping of African-American identity in the contexts of both the experience of the South and the Great Migration to the cities of the north. Hurston’s own migration north brought her into close contact with the major figures of the Harlem Renaissance, and her work’s bending and blending of genres and styles opened new territory for the exploration of African-American roots. 246 pp.

### ***The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl (2006) by Timothy Egan***

Timothy Egan describes the first of the new storms that would come to define the Dust Bowl: “Wasn’t a sandstorm.... And it wasn’t a hailstorm, thou it certainly brought with it a dark, threatening sky.... It rolled, like a mobile hill of crud, and it was black.” On September 14, 1930, the storm was a mere curiosity; over the course of the next decade, it would become a familiar nightmare. Egan’s rich history of the Dust Bowl integrates ecological and economic history with first-person recollections and an emphasis on personal experience. Egan provides a masterful overview of the dust storms and their consequences for agriculture and people on the Great Plains. 312 pp.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

### Histories of the Thirties

Anthony Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1932-1940* (2002).  
Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (2010).  
William Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940* (2009).  
Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941* (1993).  
Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (2008).  
Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970).

### Selected American Literature of the Thirties

James Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934).  
Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (1932).  
Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (1939).  
William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom* (1936).  
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* (1934).  
Dashiell Hammett, *The Glass Key* (1930), *The Maltese Falcon* (1931), *The Thin Man* (1932).  
Ernest Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not* (1937); *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940).  
Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934).  
John Steinbeck, *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).  
Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940).

### Government-Sponsored Documentation and Art Projects

Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938 at  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/> (many individual state surveys also available in book forms;  
Kansas slave narratives available in Kindle Edition from Amazon).  
"By the People, For the People: Posters from the WPA, 1936-1943," at  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaposters/wpahome.html> .  
Federal Writers Project, *The WPA Guide to 1930s Kansas* (1939; rpt. 1984).  
New Deal/WPA in Kansas at: <http://www.wpamurals.com/kansas.htm> .  
Smithsonian Institution, *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs* (1972).  
Smithsonian Federal Arts Project, Photographic Division collection at  
[http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/searchimages/images.cfm/filter\\_type/Collection/filter\\_key/5467](http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/searchimages/images.cfm/filter_type/Collection/filter_key/5467) .

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Terry Baker and Connie Oliver Henshaw, eds., *Women Who Pioneered Oklahoma: Stories from the WPA Narratives* (2007).  
Ennis Carter, *Posters for the People: The Art of the WPA* (2008).  
Megan Hiller, et al., eds., *An Ornerly Bunch: Tales Collected by the WPA Montana Writers' Project, 1935-1942* (1999).  
Archie Hobson, ed., *Remembering America: A Sampler of the WPA American Guide Series* (1985).  
David La Vere, *Life among the Texas Indians: The WPA Narratives* (2005).  
Francis O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930's by Artists and Administrators of the Federal Arts Project* (1975).  
David A. Taylor, *Soul of a People: The WPA Writers' Project Uncovers Depression America* (2009).  
Ann Prentice Wagner, *1934: A New Deal for Artists* (exhibition catalog, 2009).  
Pat Willard, ed., *America Eats! On the Road with the WPA: The Fish Fries, Box Supper Socials, and Chitlin Feasts that Define Real American Food* (1935; rpt. 2009).