

# *The Day of the Locust*

by  
Nathanael West

## StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 7

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### Discussion questions

Does Nathanael West show sympathy or disdain toward his characters?

Many successful careers began with aspirations and visions that seemed impossible or foolish to others. Why don't the dreams of West's characters come true?

### Additional readings

F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Last Tycoon*, 1941.

Budd Schulberg. *What Makes Sammy Run?* 1941.

Evelyn Waugh. *The Loved One*, 1948.

Nathanael West. *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 1933.

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Nathanael West's fourth and final novel is a disturbing indictment of American society, in which boredom and comic absurdity turn to violence. Written in the 1930s, West's novels were not like the works of his contemporaries, many of whom wrote straightforward stories about social and economic injustices. West created a peculiar mix of pathos and comedy, realism and surrealism, that reflected his persistent suspicion that most people's lives are laughable and pitiable, consumed in fantasies. Although his talent was acknowledged in literary circles, West received little acclaim during his lifetime. Perhaps the American public found his pessimism too disturbing, especially in midst of the Great Depression and world war.

Even today, some readers are deeply shaken by West's insights into the absurdities of American lifestyles. Critic Leslie Fiedler has written:

***Putting down a book by West, a reader is not sure whether he has been presented with a nightmare endowed with the conviction of actuality or with actuality distorted into the semblance of a nightmare, but in either case, he has the sense that he has been presented with a view of the world in which, incredibly, he lives.***

Nathanael West was filled with "an unloseable sense that nothing in life was as it seemed," said cultural historian Alfred Kazin. Born Nathan Weinstein in 1903 in New York, he was raised in a prosperous middle-class family; his Jewish immigrant parents spent much of their lives masking their heritage to fit into American society and avoid prejudice and suspicion. His father, a successful building contractor, hoped his son would one day head the family business. Instead, Nathan Weinstein became Nathanael West, dropped out of high school and faked his way into college, where he played the role of a jazz-age collegiate dandy until graduation.

During the early years of the Depression, West stayed afloat by working in residential hotels, renting inexpensive rooms to failed businessmen, part-time prostitutes, and lonely men who lingered in the lobby desperate for conversation.

To impoverished young writers like himself, he offered free lodging. At one hotel, six people committed suicide by jumping from the same terrace. West was curious about the lives of his lodgers, and characters like them—ordinary people faced with extraordinary struggles—became the focus of his writing.

One critic describes West's characters as "... unconsciously trapped—people who were, in their blindness, so tragic as to be comic figures." Soon after the publication of *Miss Lonelyhearts* in 1933, he was offered a job as screenwriter for Columbia Pictures. He eagerly accepted, moved to Hollywood, and was laid off within a year. West's subsequent experiences in Hollywood were distilled into his most famous work, *The Day of the Locust*, published in 1939.

The narrator of *The Day of the Locust* is Tod Hackett, a Yale art school graduate who supports himself as a set designer for a Hollywood studio. Tod has aspirations to paint "The Burning of Los Angeles," his vision of a southern California apocalypse. As the novel unfolds, this vision becomes real, culminating in a surreal riot at a gala Hollywood premier.

From the beginning of the book, Tod is acutely aware of the disparity between reality and illusion in Hollywood. Tod looks out into the street and sees that:

***The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneaks with a bandanna around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court.***

Soon Tod is infatuated with Faye Greener, a young woman "shiny as a new spoon," who lives with her father, Harry Greener, in Tod's apartment building. Faye fancies herself an undiscovered starlet; she's consumed with fantasies of stardom, and although she flirts openly with Tod (and other men), she is completely lost in her ambitions and unavailable to possibilities of love. Harry Greener is an ex-vaudevillian turned huckster, peddler of a phony Miracle Silver Polish he produces in his own apartment.

Through Harry and Faye, Tod meets timid Homer Simpson, a bookkeeper and the quintessential midwesterner who has moved to sunny southern California. Homer also falls for Faye, and she plays him for every dollar he's willing to part with in return for the illusion of a possible romance with her. But Faye remains inaccessible except in fantasy. After Harry dies, Faye turns to prostitution.

Homer in particular has difficulty handling Faye's callousness toward him. After she rejects him, Homer decides to leave Hollywood and move back to Iowa, but he suffers a nervous breakdown and finds himself wandering into a crowd gathered to gawk at stars arriving for the opening of a new movie. Homer murders a child who torments him, the crowd riots and a policeman pulls Tod Hackett from the mob to safety. This surreal sequence of events enables Tod to complete in his mind the apocalyptic painting "The Burning of Los Angeles."

The painting represents the anger and frustration of the many people who came to California expecting the promised land, the Golden State, the land of opportunity, but found themselves no better off in California than anywhere else, locked out of the glamour and riches they sought. They feel cheated. They are bored, disillusioned, and prone to violence. At the close of the twentieth century, some readers might agree that Nathanael West's dark visions were prophetic indeed.

## About the author

After some success as a Hollywood screenwriter, Nathanael West died in a car crash in 1940 (the same weekend fellow Hollywood writer F. Scott Fitzgerald died in Los Angeles). Screenwriter Waldo Salt adopted *The Day of the Locust* for a 1975 film of the same name produced by Paramount Studios and directed by John Schlesinger.