

LITERARY HIGHLIGHTS OF SAN FRANCISCO-Greg Ohannesson

Introduction. I've based this short walker's guide to Literary Highlights of San Francisco primarily on a book (currently in print) by Don Herron, "The Literary World of San Francisco & its Environs," (City Lights Books, 1990). However, I've limited my list to about 50 locations, which are usually identified by plaques, monuments & streets. I've deliberately left out addresses of buildings, hotels and residences, which indicate that 'Wm. Saroyen lived here' or 'worked here.' I highly recommend Herron's guidebook, which identifies over 200 San Francisco sites and 80 other Bay Area sites.

MARKET STREET AND SOUTH OF MARKET (SOMA)

(1) **Herb Caen** Way-the Embarcadero from the Ferry Building to Fisherman's wharf.
Caen

1916-1997), was this city's favorite journalist; and an exponent of 3-dot journalism. He coined the term 'beatnik.'

(2) **Robert Frost** Plaque-corner of Drumm & Market, across from the California Street Cable Car turntable. Frost (1874-1963) was born in SF somewhere north of Market & East of Van Ness; and was noted for his 'New England' style of poetry (1874-1963).

(3) **Ambrose Bierce** Street-Aldrich Street, behind the old San Francisco Examiner, off of New Montgomery & Mission. Bierce (1842-1914?) was a resident in this city and in various locations in the Bay Area & California from the late 1860's through the early 1900's. He wrote for the Hearst papers, the Argonaut and the Overland Monthly. He was the author of the *Devil's Dictionary*, civil war stories and early horror stories, such as *Moxon's Master*. 'Bitter' Bierce was dubbed the wickedest man in SF and once wrote that "The Italians continue their cheerful national recreation of stabbing one another." He was an associate of **Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Jack London, Lillie Hitchcock Coit** and other early Bohemians. He wandered off into Mexico to join Pancho Villa's forces and was never heard from again.

(4) Lotta's Fountain - @ Geary, Kearny & Market. Donated by actress Lotta Crabtree (the toast of the goldfields in 1875). **Fritz Leiber** (1910-1992), modern science fiction and horror writer, wrote the SF based horror novel *Our Lady of Darkness*, and sets a scene at this site.

(5) **Jack London** Street-Center St. off of Bryant St. between 2nd and 3rd Streets. This Street and the plaque described below commemorate the approximate birthplace of Jack London (1876-1916) in this city. There are a couple of pleasant coffee shops located around South Park itself.

(6) **Jack London** Plaque-601-605 Third Street near Brannen Street. London was the celebrated author of *Call of the Wild*, *The Sea Wolf* and *Martin Eden*.

CIVIC CENTER

(7) Old Public Library (closed for renovation, 1997)-corner of McAllister & Larkin. **Kevin Starr**, State Librarian (1997) was the SF Library director when he wrote *Land's End*, a novel set in SF and California. Dashiell Hammett, Eric Hoffer, Leiber & other well-known SF writers frequented the library.

(8) **James D. Phelan** Bust-Civic Center, inside City Hall at Polk Street entrance (closed for renovation, 1997). Phelan (1824-1892) was a native of SF, Mayor from 1891-1902 & US Senator 1915-1927. He was an amateur poet & patron of the arts. As Senator he created an official poet laureateship for California (awarded to **Ina Donna Coolbrith**), the first such award established in the United States

UNION SQUARE-NOB HILL

(9) Burrit Street-off of Bush next to the Stockton Street overlook. A plaque here commemorates **Dashiell Hammett's** classic, *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) with the statement: "In approximately this spot Miles Archer, partner of Sam Spade, was done in by Brigid O'Shaughnessy."

(10) **Dashiell Hammett** Street-Monroe St. parallel to Powell between Pine and Bush. Hammett (1894-1961) lived on this street at #20, while writing his Continental Op stories. The Op is a model for modern SF mystery writer **Bill Pronzini's** 'Nameless Detective' novels.

(11) John's Grill -63 Ellis off of Powell. In **Hammett's** *The Maltese Falcon* Sam Spade eats here. This cafe also features Hammett and Maltese Falcon memorabilia and is an important stop for Hammett fans.

(12) **Isadora Duncan** Plaque-501 Taylor, off of Geary. Duncan (1878-1927) The legendary dancer was born at this site. She was one of many artists mentored by **Ina Donna Coolbrith**. In 1927 she wrote her autobiography *My Life*. She was tragically strangled by her own scarf, which caught in the wheel of her open automobile. Visit also the nearby--**Isadora Duncan** Street-Adelaide St. off of Taylor near Post.

(13) Bohemian Club & Plaque-Northeast corner of Taylor and Post. The plaque on Taylor shows the Bohemian Club owl and their Motto "Weaving Spiders come not here," a reference to the Club's grove on the Russian River. Famous author members and associates included **Ambrose Bierce, Joaquin Miller** (poet of the Sierras), **John, Muir, Jack London, Frank Norris**, and **George Sterling**, who lived at the club 1920s until his self-inflicted death by cyanide.

(14) **Bret Harte** Plaque-on the Post St. side of the Bohemian Club. Harte (1836-1892) was the creator of the 'local color' school of writing. He moved to California in 1854 and lived in SF during 1860-68. He was the co-founder and editor of the *California Journal*, during which time he persuaded **Mark Twain** to begin writing for the Journal.

Harte was the author of *The Luck of Roaring Camp* and *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*. Also visit--**Bret Harte** Terrace-off of Francisco St. Between Jones & Leavenworth.

(15) Dennis T. Sullivan Plaque-870 Bush near Tayler. Dedicated to Sullivan (1852-1906), the city's Fire Chief at the time of the 1906 earthquake, who was killed when his home's chimney collapsed on him. (1852-1906) The literary link is that the plaque's memorial verse was written by **George Sterling**: "By fire shall hearts be proven, lest virtues gold grow dim; and his by fire was tested, in life's ordeal of him. Now California renders, the laurels that he won; dead on the field of honor, her hero and her son."

(16) **Robert Louis Steveson** Plaque-608 Bush St. East of Monroe. Stevenson (1850-1894) lived at this site in 1879. RLS spent only one year in California, having come here to pursue Fanny Osbourne whom he married in SF in 1880. They spent their honeymoon in the Napa Valley, the setting for his *Silverado Squatters*. During his stay in California RLS also resided in Monterey and Oakland.

RUSSIAN HILL & POLK GULCH

(18) **Ina Donna Coolbrith** Park & Plaque-1700 block of Taylor at the foot of the Vallejo St. Stairs. Coolbrith (1841-1928), while Oakland Public Librarian, was mentor to young **Jack London**. Later in SF, as one of the early Bohemians, she was a close friend of **Bret Harte**, **Mark Twain** and others. She was the first Poet Laureate of California.

(19) **George Sterling** Glade-SE corner of Larkin and Lombard. Sterling (1869-1926) was the acknowledged King of Bohemian San Francisco. He was the best friend of **Jack London** and close friends with **Ambrose Bierce** and **Joaquin Miller**. He was the unofficial poet laureate of SF and wrote such poems as *The City by the Sea* and *The Cool Gray City of Love*, from which the following well known couplet is taken: "Though the dark be cold and blind. Yet her sea-fog's touch is kind. And her mightier caress is joy and the pain thereof, and great is thy tenderness, O cool, gray city of love."

20) **Gillett Burgess**-corner of Vallejo & Florence. I couldn't resist including this item, even though there is no plaque. The Burgess (1866-1951) residence at this site was destroyed in 1906. Burgess, a prolific author & prankster, wrote *The Ballad of the Hyde Street Grip* & the *Purple Cow* ditties: -"I've never seen a purple cow, I never hope to see one. But I can tell you anyhow, I'd rather see than be one!" -"Yes I wrote the Purple Cow. I'm sorry now I wrote it. But I can tell you anyhow, I'll kill you if you quote it!"

(21) **Frank Norris** Street-Austin St. off Polk bet. Bush & Pine. Norris (1870-1902) wrote *McTeague* (1899), set in Polk Gulch, and considered an outstanding early example of American Naturalism. He also wrote *The Octopus* (1901), set in a Central San Joaquin Valley agrarian culture caught in the grip of the Southern Pacific (of Big Four fame) railroad monopoly. This novel culminates in the Mussel Slough tragedy of 1880. He died at the age of thirty-two of complications following surgery for appendicitis.

PACIFIC HEIGHTS (not on map)

(22) **Gertrude Atherton** Plaque-in north Lafayette Park, at Octavia & Washington. Atherton (1857-1948) was born SF city on Rincon Hill. She wrote several books including *Black Oxen* (1923) & *My San Francisco* (1948).

(23) 3119 Fillmore-between Filbert & Greenwich. Currently the Silk Route (1997), this converted auto-repair garage was once the Six Gallery where **Allen Ginsberg** gave his sensational first public reading of *Howl* on October 13, 1955.

FISHERMAN'S WHARF

(24) **Joseph Conrad** Memorial-Triangle bounded by Columbus, Leavenworth & Beach streets. Conrad (1857-1924) was a master mariner in the British Merchant Marines. A bust of Conrad, scheduled for the park, languishes somewhere in storage in the nearby Maritime Museum. He was the author of *Heart of Darkness (Apocalypse Now)*, *Lord Jim*, *Typhoon* and other seafaring tales.

(25) **Richard Henry Dana** Place-at the end of Leavenworth off of Jefferson--no sign ID. Dana (1815-1882) was the author of *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840). Look across the bay to Angel Island where Dana collected a year's supply of wood for his ship *Alert* when it stopped here in the winter of 1835-36.

(26) Longshoreman's Hall-400 North Point at Mason. Focal point of longshoreman/author **Eric Hoffer** (1902-?), who wrote *The True Believer* (1951) and *Working and Thinking on the Waterfront* (1969); & other waterfront writers. It is also the site of a famous poetry reading (1964) featuring Beat poets **Lew Welch, Gary Snyder & Philip Whalen**. In 1965 the hall held a Rock 'n Roll Dance & concert featuring Jefferson Airplane, the Marbles, the Great Society and the Charlatans; which launched the hippie movement into full orbit. In 1966 a concert there featured the Grateful Dead & other early rock bands.

Gary Snyder (1930-), Beat poet, is an outdoorsman, ecologist and Buddhist. He was in the Asian Language program at UC Berkeley & studied in Japan. His book *Turtle Island* (1974) was awarded the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for poetry

NORTH BEACH-TELEGRAPH HILL

(27) **Bob Kaufman** St.-off Filbert between Grant and Kearny. Kaufman (1925-86) was an African-Jewish jazz poet. He served 20 years in the Merchant Marines and settled in SF in about 1958. He fiercely defended free speech and the right to read his poetry in public settings. He wrote the poem *Round About Midnight*, and titled it after a Thelonious Monk song.

(28) Via Bufano-Grover Pl., @ Columbus, Filbert & Powell. **Bennie Bufano** (1898-1970) was born in Italy and attend the Art Students League in New York during 1913-15.

He settled in SF in 1921. His numerous sculptures are scattered throughout SF, including one across Powell from the SF Suites.

(29) Washington Square, **Irving Stone** Plaque-@ Columbus, Powell & Union. Stone (1903-1989), a SF native, wrote *Sailor on Horseback*, a biography of **Jack London**. Also visit the Washington Square Bar & Grill across Columbus, a major hangout for more recent 'uptown' writers such as **Herb Caen**.

(30) Via Ferlinghetti-Price Row, off Union between Stockton & Grant. **Lawrence Ferlinghetti** (1919-) has an earned doctorate (Sorbonne), is the author of many books of poetry, & of several volumes of plays & novels. He has lived in SF since 1951 & is one of the godfathers of the West Coast Beat movement. **Ferlinghetti** also conceived of and spearheaded the drive for a series of SF literary streets, which resulted in the sites featured in this article

(31) City Lights Bookstore-261 Columbus near SW corner of Broadway. Established by **Ferlinghetti** (& Peter D. Martin) in 1953, City Lights was the nation's first all-paperback store. The store is famous for publishing **Allen Ginsberg's** *Howl*, which was printed in England. U.S. Customs seized it, as being obscene. **Ferlinghetti** & others were arrested but later cleared..

Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) studied at Columbia U, lived in S. F. from 1954-58, and wrote *Howl* and *Kaddish* (a long eulogy to his dead mother). He was anti-war, anti-military-industrial complex, & gravely concerned with nuclear contamination. He organized the Six Poets at Six Gallery (**Ginsberg, Snyder, Whalen, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, & Kenneth Rexroth**) held on October 13, 1955. His reading of *Howl* created a sensation. (Also see site # 23.) He was viewed as a spokesperson for people rejected by the mainstream: addicts, gays, the mentally ill, etc. His book of poetry *The Fall of America, Poems of These States* (1973) won the National Book Award for poetry in 1974.

(32) Vesuvio's-255 Columbus, across Jack Kerouac Street from City Lights Bookstore. A cafe-bar where essentially every local writer has hung out since its establishment in 1949 including **Dylan Thomas, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, & Bob Kaufman**. It's a perfect spot to evoke the Beat 1950s atmosphere.

(33) **Jack Kerouac** Street-off Columbus between City Lights Bookstore and Vesuvio's. Kerouac (1922-1969) entered Columbia U on a football scholarship, but left soon after to pursue a literary career. His one great work was his fictionalized biography of himself, *On the Road*. *The Subterraneans* (which includes a moving tribute to Charlie Parker) is set in SF; as is *October in the Railroad Earth*, a record of his job as a brakeman on the train between San Jose and SF.

(34) **Wm. Saroyen** Place-Adler Alley, off Columbus across from City Lights Bookstore. Saroyen (1908-1981) was born in Fresno and lived in SF in the late 1920s. He wrote *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*, *My Name is Aram*, and the play *The Time of your Life*, for which he refused the Pulitzer Prize. 'Life' is said to be based on the real-life characters at Izzy Gomez's SF saloon.

(35) The Purple Onion-140 Columbus between Pacific & Jackson. The PO was a mainstay of North Beach night life in the 1950s. Performers included the Smothers brothers, Barbra Streisand, Woody Allen, The Kingston Trio, and Maya Angelu.

(36) **Kenneth Rexroth** Place-Tracy, off Columbus & Vallejo. Rexroth (1905-1982) was an anarchist poet, critic, and translator of Asian poetry & playwright. He arrived in SF in 1926 & was a WWII conscientious objector.

(37) Beach Blanket Babylon Blvd.-the 600 block of Green St. off of Columbus. This section of the street was renamed for the zany review held in Fugazi Hall at 678 Green St. It was one of the sites of the Poets Follies, held in the mid 1950s.

(38) **Turk Murphy** Lane-Churchill St. off of Vallejo near Powell. I couldn't resist including this street; as it honors the late great Dixieland trombonist whose band played for many years at Earthquake McGoons.

CHINATOWN-JACKSON SQUARE

(39) The Montgomery Block Plaque-in the lobby of the Transamerica pyramid @ Montgomery between Washington & Clay. The 'Monkey' Block was built of brick in 1859 on a 'raft' of redwood logs to survive earthquakes; it was also virtually fireproof. It was torn down in 1959 and eventually replaced by the TA pyramid. It was lived and worked in by countless scores of writers including **Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Frank Norris, Charles Warren Stoddard, Joaquin Miller, Gelett Burgess, Mary Austin & George Sterling**. The Monkey Block was the original focal point of early SF Bohemians. Across the street at 655 Montgomery, in the public lobby of the Washington Towers, are some literary mementos of the Monkey Block era.

(40) **Mark Twain** Plaza-just East of the TA Tower. Mark Twain was the pen name of Sam Clemens (1835-1910). He arrived in Nevada Territory in 1861 & eventually became a reporter for the Virginia City (Nev.) Enterprise. He moved to SF in 1864 and contributed articles to two local periodicals, *The Golden Era* and *The Californian*. **Bret Harte** was the editor of the Californian at that time and Twain received valuable tutelage under him. He became the good friend of other early Bohemians including **Ina Coolbrith, Joaquin Miller, Artemus Ward** and **Charles Warren Stoddard**. Also during this time he was made the city editor of the *Morning Call* newspaper; and wrote for another local periodical, *The San Francisco Alta Journal*. His first major national success was *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. He left California, essentially for good, in December of 1866. 'Frog' was later published in a book *The*

Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County & Other Sketches (1867). His Western adventures were published in *Roughing It* (1872).

(41) Portsmouth Square-is the site of a **Robert Louis Stevenson** memorial statue (1897) of the Hispaniola, the sailing vessel featured in *Treasure Island* (1883). RLS was a friend of fellow SF bohemians **Charles Warren Stoddard, Bret Hart & Ina Coolbrith**. It's been argued that the setting of *Treasure Island* was inspired by Pt. Lobos just South of Carmel, which the map of the Island closely resembles.

(42) **John Hamilton Still** Plaque-at No. 19 Walter U. Lum Place, off Washington, across from Portsmouth Square. In 1849 Still opened the city's first book store at this site.

(43) Chinese Cultural Center-in the Holiday Inn, across Kearney opposite Portsmouth Square. Visit here to acclaim SF Chinese-American authors such as **C. Y. Lee** (*Chan is Missing*) and **Ruthanne Lum McCunn** (*A Thousand Pieces of Gold*).

MISSION DISTRICT (not on map)

(44) Mission Dolores-Dolores St. Between 16th & 17th Streets. **Father Francisco Palou** (1722-1789), first SF writer, lived here between about 1776-1790. Palou founded the mission in 1776. He wrote a biography about his friend Father Junipero Serra & a book about his years in California.

(45) Mission Cultural Center-2868 Mission St. One of the major sites of the Latin & South American literary & political activities. The Mission District is also the center of the most active poetry scene in SF since the Beats ruled North Beach; & includes sites, which focus on the women's literary movement.

HAIGHT-FILLMORE DISTRICT (not on map)

(46) The Kinokura Bookstore-Japantown bet. Geary/Post & Laguna/Fillmore. The store features book parties & poetry readings, as well as Asian language books & titles by Japanese-American authors.

(47) Zen Center of San Francisco-@ the Northwest corner of Page & Laguna. Poet **Philip Whalen** (1923-) served in the Army Air Corps in WWII and has lived here as a Buddhist monk since 1973. He was a roommate of beat poets **Gary Snyder & Lew Welch**, an associate of **Kerouac** and **Ginzberg**. He was a participant in the famous Six Gallery poetry reading in 1956 and in a similar reading in the Longshoreman's Hall in 1964. Phone the Center (863-3136) for its public hours.

Diane de Prima (1934-), the only major woman Beat poet, has also lived and taught at the Zen Center off & on since the 1960s. She has published over 20 books of poetry, plays and prose.

(48) UC Medical Center-Parnassus at Arguello. In the early 1900s the UC Museum of Anthropology was located here; and here Ishi (1862?-1916), the last wild Indian in North America, lived after he was found in 1911 until he died. Anthropologist **A. L. Kroeber** rescued and wrote about Ishi. But his wife Theodora, who wrote Ishi's biography, *Ishi, The Last of His Tribe* (1964), overshadowed his writing. Their second daughter is **Urusla Kroeber LeGuin**, who is noted for her science fiction books.

(49) Golden Gate Park - a) Stanyon Street & John F. Kennedy Drive. This is the site of **John McLaren** Lodge, which commemorates the master gardener of G. G. Park; who transformed the park from sand dunes into the largest man made park in the world. McLaren (1846-1943) wrote *Gardening in California*.

b) Obtain a map of the park to locate sculptures of these literary greats: **McLaren, Robert Burns (Scottish National Poet), Goethe & Schiller, Miguel de Cervantes, Beethoven, & Guiseppe Verde**.

c) The **Shakespeare** Garden is just behind the Academy of Science.

SUNSET DISTRICT (not on map)

(50) San Francisco State University-19th Street & Holloway. Location of the San Francisco Poetry Center founded in 1954. **Dylan Thomas, Anais Nin, W. H. Auden** and many other poets & writers have served on the University Faculty. Phone the Center (338-2227) for its public hours.

Footnote--My favorite movies about SF include: *The Maltese Falcon, Bullitt, What's Up Doc, Dirty Harry, Metro, & The Game*.