California Historical Fiction

Historical Fiction Set in California

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1906
by D'Alessandro, James

Against the raging backdrop of the great San Francisco earthquake and fire, this gripping tale of greed, murder, and love, drawn from recent discoveries, is told by a young reporter who vividly brings to life this Victorian-era city that waged two wars--one against nature's forces, and the other against corrupt politicians.

Angle of Repose
by Stegner, Wallace

A classic saga that traces the fortunes of four generations of one family as they attempt to build a life for themselves in the American West.

Blossom Festival
by Coates, Lawrence

This richly panoramic chronicle of rural life in the Santa Clara Valley during the decades before World War II depicts the complex relationships between parents and children in the changing context of a rich region leaving behind its agricultural past to become Silicon Valley.

Bohemian Murders
by Day, Dianne

Accepting a temporary position as a lighthouse keeper in the bohemian beach community of Carmel-by-the-Sea, Fremont Jones tries to find the identity of a dead woman who washes up on shore.

Bone
by Ng, Fae Myenne

Two generations of San Francisco's Leong family live in uneasy tension as they try to fathom the source of their family's sorrow.

Bright Web in the Darkness
by Saxton, Alexander

Set in the San Francisco Bay area during World War II, Bright Web in the Darkness is a novel that illuminates the role of women workers during the war and the efforts of African Americans to achieve regular standing as union members. The central characters are two young women - one black, one white - who become friends in a welding class and qualify for the shipyard jobs opening to women as male workers are drafted.

Calico Palace
by Bristow, Gwen

This thrilling story of the California gold rush is not about the forty-niners, the prospectors who came rushing to the San Francisco area in 1849, but about the men and women who were there when it all began with the first discovery of gold in 1848, when San Francisco was a village of 900 people. These were the people who went up to the hills and came back staggering under the weight of the treasure they carried, and who began transforming San Francisco from a shantytown into one of the most brilliant cities in the world.

California Gold
by Jakes, John

In 1886, eighteen-year-old James Macklin Chance journeys from Pennsylvania to California to make a new life for himself, finding love, power, and fortune in Southern California.

The Californios
by L'Amour, Louis

The Mulkerin Brothers, in a desperate attempt to settle the debt on their ranch, follow an Indian mystic to California in search of gold, with a gang of greedy gunfighters riding hard on their heels.

China Boy
by Lee, Gus

An American-born son of an aristocratic Chinese family struggles with the uncertainties of growing up torn between two cultures in a tough San Francisco neighborhood during the 1950s.

Climate of the Country
by Mueller, Marnie

The stories of the Japanese Americans interred at the Tule Lake Relocation Center during the second World War are told by Denton Jordan, a conscientious objector who both lives and works in the camp.

Daughter of Fortune
by Allende, Isabel

Raised in the British colony of Valparaiso, Chile, after being abandoned as a baby, a pregnant Eliza follows her lover, Joaquin Andieta, to California at the height of the Gold Rush and finds adventure and adversity on her road to independence and love.

Day of the Locust
by West, Nathanael

Hollywood of the 1930s and the collapse of the American dream are seen through the eyes of a refined, educated set designer and an inarticulate bookkeeper from Iowa.

Down to a Soundless Sea
by Steinbeck, Thomas

Drawing on the culture and history of northern California, a collection of short fiction captures a world in which nature has a profound influence on the sailors, immigrants, ranchers, and others who dwell on the edge of a frontier.

Grapes of Wrath
by Steinbeck, John

Depicts the hardships and suffering endured by the Joads as they journey from Oklahoma to California during the Depression.

The Human Comedy
by Saroyan, William

Members of the Macauley family find their peaceful existence in rural California greatly changed in the early months of 1942.

Indian Lover
by Murphy, Garth

Journeying to 1840s California, young Bill Marshall witnesses the tragic experiences of the California Indians and their treatment by Americans after Spain gives control of the territory to Mexico.

The Kitchen God's Wife
by Tan, Amy

A Chinese immigrant who is convinced she is dying threatens to celebrate the Chinese New Year by unburdening herself of everybody's hidden truths, thus prompting a series of comic misunderstandings.

The Legend of Fire Horse Woman
by Houston, Jeanne Wakatsuki

Traces the life of Sayo, born under the disastrous sign of the Fire Horse, who comes to America for an arranged marriage and years later is imprisoned with her family in a Japanese internment camp during World War II.

Love Awakens the Heart
by Wick, Lori

A family saga about a missionary family living in San Francisco in the 1870s.

The Luck of Roaring Camp
by Harte, Bret

In a California gold prospecting camp, Cherokee Sal gives birth to a baby boy, but the mother dies in childbirth. The men of Roaring Camp must raise the child themselves. Believing the child to be a good luck charm, the miners christen the boy Thomas Luck, and then decide to refine their behavior and refrain from gambling and fighting.

The Octopus : a story of California
by Norris, Frank

Nineteenth-century California wheat farmers wage a fierce battle against the rapid expansion into their fertile lands of the nation's railroads.

Picture Bride
by Uchida, Yoshiko

Hana travels to America to escape the arranged marriages her sisters experienced in pre-World War II Japan, but the young businessman to whom she has corresponded turns out to be a middle-aged man who exaggerated his success.

Private Life
by Smiley, Jane

When Margaret Mayfield marries Captain Andrew Jackson Jefferson Early at the age of twenty-seven, she narrowly avoids condemning herself to life as an old maid. Instead, knowing little about marriage and even less about her husband, she moves with Andrew to his naval base in California. Margaret stands by Andrew during tragedies both historical and personal, but as World War II approaches and the secrets of her husband's scientific and academic past begin to surface, she is forced to reconsider the life she had so carefully constructed.

Ramona
by Jackson, Helen Hunt

The absurdity and tragedy of prejudice is illustrated in this classic tale, set in Old California, of Ramona, a young Spanish-American orphan girl and her love for the Native American Alessandro.

San Miguel
by Boyle, T. Coraghessan

The lives of three women on turn-of-the-20th-century San Miguel are shaped by ambition and circumstance, including the wife of a Civil War veteran who hopes to recover her health, her rebellious aspiring actress daughter and a librarian who wonders if the island's peace will endure in the face of looming war.

Santa Cat: Behind the Lace Curtains, 1856-1926
by Koch, Margaret

Santa Cat, located at one end of Monterey Bay, also has rum-running, adultery, fraternal orders that would rather play cards than march, houses of ill-repute, sexism and a variety of other shenanigans. In stories more truthful than the history books, Margaret Koch gently and artfully shows us what was really going on behind those lace curtains, as this collection of characters tries to become a real community.

Shanghai Girls
by See, Lisa

In 1937 Shanghai -- the Paris of Asia -- twenty-one-year-old Pearl Chin and her younger sister, May,

are beautiful, modern, and carefree -- until the day their father tells them that he has gambled away their wealth and he must sell the girls as wives to suitors who have traveled from Los Angeles. The sisters face a long and arduous journey to California where they make terrible sacrifices and face impossible decisions.

Sierra: A Novel of the California Gold Rush
by Wheeler, Richard S.

Ulysses McQueen leaves his pregnant wife to search for gold at the same time ex-soldier Stephen Jarvis begins his journey to the West coast, and the paths of the two finally cross in California, by which time they are both changed men.

Sister Noon
by Fowler, Karen Joy

A mystery set during San Francisco's Gilded Age chronicles Lizzie Hayes's rebellious odyssey away from the pretensions of the city's social elite and her journey toward liberation and passion, with the help of Mary Ellen Pleasant.

Snow Mountain Passage
by Houston, James D.

Depicts the hardships, tragedy, and devastating starvation that confronted the Donner party, which became trapped by winter snows in the Sierra Nevadas, through the eyes of James Frazier Reed and his eight-year-old daughter, Patty.

Thousand Pieces of Gold
by McCunn, Ruthanne Lum

Chronicles the life of Lalu Nathoy, a young Chinese girl--sold as a slave and brought to America--where, later, as Polly Bemis she struggles and survives as a pioneer in the West.

When the Emperor Was Divine
by Otsuka, Julie

A story told from five different points of view, chronicles the experiences of Japanese Americans caught up in the nightmare of the World War II internment camps.

Whose Names are Unknown
by Babb, Sanora

Sanora Babb's long-hidden novel tells of the High Plains farmers who fled drought and dust storms during the Great Depression. Written with empathy for the farmers' plight, this powerful narrative is based upon the author's firsthand experience. Babb submitted the manuscript for this book to Random House for consideration in 1939. Editor Bennett Cerf planned to publish this "exceptionally fine" novel but when John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" swept the nation, Cerf explained that the market could not support two books on the subject.