

Introduction: Searching for Literary San Diego

“Historically, it seems, San Diego cannot represent itself, and is barely represented by others.”

David Reid on literary San Diego

In 1896, Theosophist Katherine Tingley had a dream of "a white city in a golden land by the sundown sea," which she came to associate with the gleaming coast of San Diego, California. Tingley's visionary imagination was a nice complement to the inflated mythology penned by the city's boosters, but not all observers fell in line with the sun-drenched utopianism of the Anglo elite. In 1932, Edmund Wilson labeled San Diego the "The Jumping-Off Place" as a result of its nation-leading suicide rate. The city, it appeared to Wilson, promised liberation but could only deliver a chimera of false hope for the sick and economically devastated. Three years after Wilson's seminal essay, the narrator in Max Miller's *The Man on the Barge*, noting the "march of pain" of desperately ill sun worshippers, dryly commented on the unspoken alienation under the azure sky by saying, "Nothing often happened here except the sun."

In the decades following the thirties, San Diego was virtually absent from the world of serious literature, seemingly existing only as a unique setting for the occasional mystery or pulp novel. Even though the city is now home to a number of prominent writers, the idea of a literary culture still seems like an alien and improbable notion to many San Diegans. Perhaps the suffocating banality of official San Diego's pious "America's Finest City" mantra has led even those who know better to think that nothing is possible here other than the affectless pleasure that comes from drifting back and forth between the beach and the mall. Nonetheless, underneath San Diego's superficial postcard sunshine, writers have found both grit and genuine transcendence. Perhaps the city is best captured by the incongruous juxtaposition of the evanescent beauty of the gleaming coast with the muted gray façade of America's multi-billion dollar killing machine. San Diego is also the sex oozing from the teeming Pacific Beach boardwalk in mid-summer and the lonely deaths of migrants in the unforgiving winter desert. San Diego is neither beyond alienation, nor devoid of ecstasy. It is both Sunshine and Noir.