



# Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s (Americans and the California Dream)

*Kevin Starr*

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Kevin Starr is the foremost chronicler of the California dream and indeed one of the finest narrative historians writing today on any subject. The first two installments of his monumental cultural history, *Americans and the California Dream*, have been hailed as "mature, well-proportioned and marvelously diverse (and diverting)" (*The New York Times Book Review*), "rich in details and alive with interesting, and sometimes incredible people" (*Los Angeles Times*), and "a luminous and delightful saga that will become an American classic" (W. Jackson Bate). Now, in *Material Dreams*, Starr turns to one of the most vibrant decades in the Golden State's history, the 1920s, when some two million Americans migrated to California, the vast majority settling in or around Los Angeles.

Although he treats readers to intriguing side trips to Santa Barbara and Pasadena, Starr focuses here mainly on Los Angeles, revealing how this major city arose almost defiantly on a site lacking many of the advantages required for urban development, creating itself out of sheer will, the Great Gatsby of American cities. He describes how William Ellsworth Smyth, the Peter the Hermit of the Irrigation Crusade, propounded the importance of water in Southern California's future, and how such figures as the self-educated, Irish engineer William Mulholland (who built the main aqueducts to Los Angeles) and George Chaffey (who diverted the Colorado River, transforming desert into the lush Imperial Valley) brought life-supporting water to the arid South. He examines the discovery of oil ("Yes it's oil, oil, oil / that makes LA boil," went the official drinking song of the Uplifters Club), the boosters and land developers, the evangelists (such as Bob Shuler, the Methodist Savanarola of Los Angeles, and Aimee Semple McPherson), and countless other colorful figures of the period. There are also fascinating sections on the city's architecture (such as the remarkably innovative Bradbury Building and its eccentric, neophyte designer, George Wyman), the impact of the automobile on city planning, the great antiquarian book collections, the Hollywood film community, and much more.

By the end of the decade, Los Angeles had tripled in population and become the fifth largest city in the nation. In *Material Dreams*, Kevin Starr captures this explosive growth in a narrative tour de force that combines wide-ranging scholarship with captivating prose.

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