



Ask the Dust

By John Fante
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Introduction

Set in the late 1930s, *Ask the Dust* tells the story of Arturo Bandini, a young, down-on-his-luck writer, who has left his hometown of Boulder, Colorado, to try his hand in the big city of Los Angeles. Bandini spends his days procrastinating, killing time in bars and cafés, and pursuing the elusive, mocking, and utterly unstable Camilla Lopez, a Mexican waitress, whose resistance to his charms makes her all the more irresistible.

As he struggles to succeed in his newly adopted city, Bandini ekes out a living from the meager royalties he receives for stories that he bases loosely on his own experiences. He perseveres until, at last, his first novel is accepted for publication. But the bright light of success gets extinguished when Camilla has a nervous breakdown and disappears. In the process of winning Camilla's love, Bandini forever rejects the writer's life he has fought so hard to attain.

A virtuoso performance by an influential master of the twentieth-century American novel, *Ask the Dust* is a poignant record of one writer's coming-of-age.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you characterize the Los Angeles of the 1930s as described by Arturo Bandini, the speaker of *Ask the Dust*?
2. How do Arturo's ambitions and goals as a writer compare to his work ethic?
3. What explains Arturo's ongoing fascination with the mysterious waitress, Camilla Lopez?
4. What does Camilla's unconventional relationship with Sammy the bartender reveal about her self-esteem, and why does Arturo agree to serve as their intermediary?
5. To what extent is *Ask the Dust* a novel of a young man's artistic and sexual awakening?
6. What does the Mojave Desert, with its unrelenting dust storms, signify to Arturo, and how does it connect to the title, *Ask the Dust*?
7. What does Arturo mean when he explains (to Camilla): "[W]hen I say Greaser to you it is not my heart that speaks, but the quivering of an old wound"?
8. Why is the earthquake -- a natural phenomenon -- connected for Arturo with feelings of individual guilt?
9. How does the author explore variations on the themes of madness and creative inspiration in the characters of Camilla Lopez, Sammy Wiggins, and Arturo Bandini?
10. How did you interpret the final scene of the novel, when Arturo throws a copy of his long-awaited book into the Mojave?

About the Author

John Fante published his first short story in 1932. His novel, *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, was published in 1938 and was the first of his Arturo Bandini series of novels, which include *The Road to Los Angeles* and *Ask the Dust*. A prolific screenwriter, Fante published *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, the final installment of the Arturo Bandini series, in 1982. He died in 1983, from complications of diabetes, at the age of seventy-four.