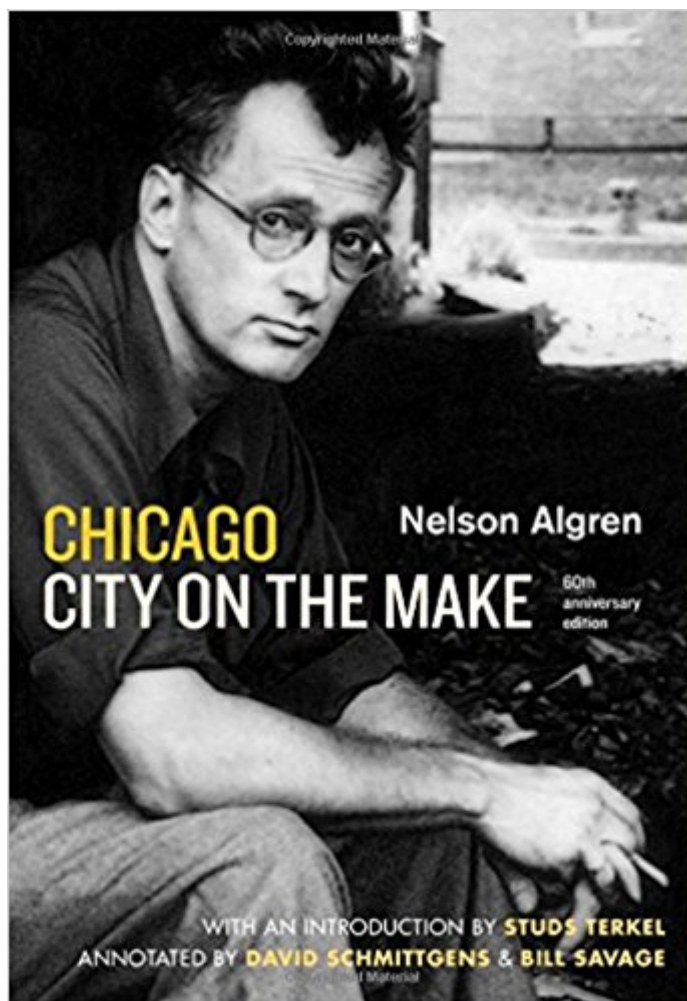


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Chicago: City On The Make: Sixtieth Anniversary Edition



Synopsis

“Once you’ve become a part of this particular patch, you’ll never love another. Like loving a woman with a broken nose, you may well find lovelier lovelies. But never a lovely so real.” Ernest Hemingway once said of Nelson Algren’s writing that “you should not read it if you cannot take a punch.” The prose poem, *Chicago: City on the Make*, filled with language that swings and jabs and stuns, lives up to those words. In this sixtieth anniversary edition, Algren presents 120 years of Chicago history through the lens of its “nobodies nobody knows”: the tramps, hustlers, aging bar fighters, freed death-row inmates, and anonymous working stiffs who prowl its streets. Upon its original publication in 1951, Algren’s *Chicago: City on the Make* was scorned by the Chicago Chamber of Commerce and local journalists for its gritty portrayal of the city and its people, one that boldly defied City Hall’s business and tourism initiatives. Yet the book captures the essential dilemma of Chicago: the dynamic tension between the city’s breathtaking beauty and its utter brutality, its boundless human energy and its stifling greed and violence. The sixtieth anniversary edition features historic Chicago photos and annotations on everything from defunct slang to Chicagoans, famous and obscure, to what the Black Sox scandal was and why it mattered. More accessible than ever, this is, as Studs Terkel says, “the best book about Chicago.”

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“The best book about Chicago.” (Studs Terkel) “Algren’s *Chicago*, a kind of American annex to Dante’s inferno, is a nether world peopled by rat-faced hustlers and money-loving demons who crawl in the writer’s brilliant, sordid, uncompromising and

twisted imagination. . . . [This book] searches a city's heart and mind rather than its avenues and public buildings. (New York Times Book Review) "This short, crisp, fighting creed is both a social document and a love poem, a script in which a lover explains his city's recurring ruthlessness and latent power; in which an artist recognizes that these are portents not of death, but of life. (New York Herald Tribune) --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Nelson Algren (1909–1981) won the National Book Award in 1950 for *The Man with the Golden Arm*. His works include *A Walk on the Wild Side*, *The Neon Wilderness*, and *Chicago: City on the Make*, the last published by the University of Chicago Press. David Schmittgens teaches English at St. Ignatius College Prep in Chicago. Bill Savage is a senior lecturer at Northwestern University and coeditor of the fiftieth anniversary critical edition of *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

I had the pleasure of reading *Chicago: City on the Make* in part, on a hot summer's day sitting in the back of a moving van with the door open, using a cargo strap as a seat belt. Riding along to the next job reading my first Algren made it an afternoon of twists and turns literal and figurative. As others have pointed out, this book is not a novel, novella or story collection, but a prose poem. They say it like that is a bad thing; as if any potential reader is such an idiot that the book should be printed with an I.Q.-based warning label ("Warning: unless you can handle Sartre in the original, this book might make your eyes bleed"). The book is a prose poem but so what? It's one of those rare and sometimes great books that can be read aloud for the language alone and for the most part, Algren makes every word about the cold wind off the river and the deep corruption count. When he is at his best, he makes the place sound positively holy--like something that glows. *Chicago: City on the Make* was like nothing I had ever read then and it is vastly unlike anything I have read since. I am re-buying it for someone else to read (a Chicago native, in fact) but I'm going to get to peek into it again before I give it to him. *Chicago: City on the Make* is more than just a book it is an experience, a way of doing things that only top-flight, internationally famous authors have the stones to write anymore. My experience of the book is old, in fact, so old, so that I remember only a few words from a few lines clearly and I am left with two major impressions in memory. The first is that it was a brilliant thing, fully worthy of being called "literature." The second was that after an amazing job of keeping his prose flying high above what other authors could ever hope for, the thing bogs down in the end. Algren's voice becomes tired, his segues more and more stretched until there's nothing left of the energy you find in the beginning, but you soon find that you can't really blame him. Algren

was not up to the task of finishing his amazing slender volume, but you can't blame him for it: it is certain that no one else could have done any part of it at all.

This is a magnificent prose poem-eulogy even- by Nelson Algren to his city. He takes you through all the characters and diverse cultures and corruptions that ingrained the Chicago he grew up in and are either being erased from the image the commercial big guns want to promote, or have just fallen by the wayside. There's a lot of visceral anger coming through in this book, and it is significant that Algren wrote it during the odious McCarthy anti Communist witch trails that was stifling the freedoms of speech Algren so valued (he dumped his communist party interests as soon as the lack of free thought became obvious to him-now 'free' society was doing the same!) and distorting and promoting a mythical America that just didn't exist outside of a Disney film! The afterword and annotations in the 50th anniversary edition are vital to get the maximum from this book. Algren re articulates what his views are, and -to my mind-makes a posthumous apology to his friend Richard Wright who he slammed for leaving Chicago for Paris and 'not sticking it out'. What could one black man who had suffered a life time of rejection and abuse do but say he'd had enough. I liked Algren the better for this acknowledgement.

thanks

Although I have lived in Chicago for many years now, I am not a native Chicagoan, and I have to say that the attitudes and visions of Chicago that one finds in Nelson Algren's are not held by most of the people I have gotten to know well in Chicago. But, then, most of the people I know are also not native Chicagoans. The swagger, the love-hate, the cynicism, and the love and civic pride that manage to emerge despite the cynical pessimism are very definitely found in many of those I have come to know who were born and raised in the city. Nelson Algren's Chicago was one that was more strictly American than it is today, less international, more Midwestern, more radical, less conventional. It is a Chicago that in many ways no longer exists. This can be felt in the book's narrative voice. Algren writes in a prose that sounds like Carl Sandburg drenched in Baudelaire, and the various sections of the book sound more than anything like the kind of stuff that Baudelaire would have written had he strolled the streets of Chicago rather than Paris. The prose is always unique, frequently beautiful, oftentimes stunning. There are definitely times that it will be all but impenetrable to someone not well schooled in Chicago's geography and its history. If one really wanted to get all the references and historical citations, one should consider reading Donald Miller's

CITY OF THE CENTURY, which will clue one in on most of the 19th century and more obscure references. But in a sense, being able to identify all the names and places isn't all that crucial. The heart of the book is intelligible regardless. An essential literary work about one of the world's great cities, by one of its great writers.

great read

Algren poetically describes how he sees Chicago; as a city that was and is a home for "hustlers" looking to make an easy buck. As the book progresses, he elaborates on what he perceives as the loss of edginess in the city's writers, as well as condemning a number of the other social maladies of the time (the HUAC being foremost among them).

Great history.

I read this book as part of a class and am so happy that I did. Algren's language is delicious and the book made me smile. Maybe that is because I am a lifelong Chicagoan.

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