



## Chicago: City on the Make

*Nelson Algren , Studs Terkel (Introduction) , David Schmittgens (Editor) , Bill Savage*

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**This 50th anniversary edition has been newly annotated by David Schmittgens and Bill Savage with explanations for everything from Chicago history to slang to what the Black Sox scandal was and why it mattered.**

*In this slender classic ... Algren tells us all we need to know about passion, heaven, hell. And a city.* - From the introduction by **Studs Terkel**

**Nelson Algren** (1909 - 1981) won the National Book Award in 1950 for *The Man with the Golden Arm*. His other works include *Walk on the Wild Side*, and *Conversations with Nelson Algren*, the last available from the University of Chicago Press.

**David Schmittgens** teaches English at New Trier High School in Northfield, Illinois.

**Bill Savage** is a senior lecturer at Northwestern University and coeditor of the 50th Anniversary Critical Edition of *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

Cover photograph: Robert McCulloch

## Chicago: City on the Make Details

Date : Published September 25th 2001 by University Of Chicago Press (first published 1951)

ISBN : 9780226013855

Author : Nelson Algren , Studs Terkel (Introduction) , David Schmittgens (Editor) , Bill Savage

Format : Paperback 135 pages

Genre : Poetry, Nonfiction, History

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# From Reader Review Chicago: City on the Make for online ebook

## Brian Gatz says

This is one of the best things I've ever happened upon--Algren's name is legendary, but I've mostly overlooked him. Too much of this book is too much good to comment on. I don't really know where to begin. As a knee-jerk lefty, there's a lot of Algren that's easy to agree with: the brokers and hustlers reward themselves of other's efforts; there's blood on the streets; you'll live your whole life in the shadows of towers; no one will remember your efforts unless you've stolen them of someone else's labor. On top of that, there's a soft spot for artists and poets run through the whole thing. With that sort of subject, written in a muscular, symbolist measure, I can't help but be a fan. Whether or not that's a book worth the reading, I couldn't say. For me, it's an exemplary American effort, over and beyond the facile complaints of the upper-middleclass so haunts our fiction--here the sweat and tears of Dreiser, Masters, Sandburg, find comment and expansion. Chicago's no sweet home, but the most terrible and American of places, scourged by power, reinvented, rootless--resting place of Haymarket and the ten thousand discouraged.

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## Dane says

I'm skeptical of anyone who loves their hometown.

Tucson is my "city on the make," that literal source of my life with memories, landscapes, traditions, and family that are the proudest parts of who I am. But it's also a place that disappoints me in the way that only a hometown could. Where you grew up, is after all, by necessity, the place where you learned about human nature. Nelson Algren expresses some true crestfallen despondency toward Chicago in the way that only a person with a natal connection to a hometown could.

But Chicago is my chosen home, and this prose poem feels painful and insulting — and overly cynical — as Algren comes close to basically wishing Lake Michigan would wash the entire city away. It's the power and beauty of his prose that makes it sting even more. The criticisms of Chicago's graft and desperate hustling are universally acknowledged— and I've personally witnessed my share of the Chicago-style inferiority complex and dishonesty through my experiences in this city's film industry. I know it's racist and segregated, that it's a neoliberal basin, that low-income fifth-generation citizens are getting priced out of their neighborhoods left and right, that the political machine is internationally associated with corruption, that all the talented artists keep leaving for the coasts once they've gotten a taste of success.

But I like this city. I have hope for it. I have to, because I choose to live here.

But again, I get it. Hometown resentment is a powerful force of nature. At the end of the day though I'll take Sandburg's "Chicago" over this — the sweatier, more vibrant, hopeless but proud Chicago.

"You'll know it's the place built out of Man's ceaseless failure to overcome itself. Out of Man's endless war against himself we build our successes as well as our failures. Making it the city of all cities most like Man himself—loneliest creation of all this very poor old earth."

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## Peter Tavalacci says

After completing *Never Come Morning* and *Chicago: City on the Make*, I may have to declare Nelson Algren as one of my top five favorite authors.

Sixty years after being penned, *Chicago: City on the Make* retains all of its poignancy; it remains an honest portrayal of the history of Chicago; it makes real the lives of the easily forgotten. This gritty piece of prose poetry, I think, is easily related to by any who have loved, hated, or hated to love Chicago.

In about eighty pages, Algren poetically transcribes about 120 years of this city's history, chronicling the transition from untamed Pottawattomie prairie to a city, "That was to forge, out of steel and blood-red neon, its own peculiar wilderness" (11).

He begins, in his sardonic prose, with a description of those who settled this land and their ruthless waging with the Native people that called this place home. This place would be later known as Hustler City:

They'd [the pioneering middle westerners] do anything under the sun except work for a living, and we remember them reverently, with Balban and Katz, under such titles as "Founding Fathers," "Dauntless Pioneers," or "Far-Visioned Conquerors."

Meaning merely they were out to make a fast buck off whoever was standing nearest.

They never conquered as well as they hustled—their arithmetic was sharper than their hunting knives. (12)

He continues in this fashion, uttering line after line our city's hidden truths. He strips her bare (and to those that have loved her, she is tragically beautiful). Algren ignores the Louis Sullivans and the Stephen Douglasses, and focuses his writing upon, "the nobodies from nowhere, the nobodies nobody knows, with faces cut from the same cloth as their caps, and the women whose eyes reflect nothing but the pavement" (67). He asserts that this is where you will find the heart of Chicago, not among the mirrorlike windows of our tallest towers. They don't reflect anything of substance for him. No, a true reflection of this city is found in its fighters, its writers, its workers, its alley-dwellers, its tavern owners, its young toughs, and its working families.

Algren uses many of his pages here to detail the horrors of city life, elevating Chicago to prime exemplar. However, he warns that, "Before you earn the right to rap any sort of joint, you have to have loved it a little while. You have to belong to Chicago like a crosstown transfer out of the Armitage Avenue barns first; and you can't rap it then just because you've been crosstown" (42). These motions of admonishing urban life are as uniquely American, at this time, as Chicago herself. But Algren cannot simply disparage Chicago; he loves this city and he loves the people that populate it. In what are, perhaps, my favorite lines of the poem, Algren proclaims, "Yet once you've come to be 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" (23).

I think this holds true for many, especially for me, as I have tried to make my life in another city, but found myself wanting of the familiar, dusty alleyways; the street-side shops whose neon banners cry their wares in Spanish, Polish, Italian, Bohemian, Dutch, Hebrew, Ukrainian; the neighborhood talent striving to make their way by basketball, rhythmic poetry, and homemade CD's. And yes, I'm sure that many cities afford their residents these comforts, but reading Algren's words makes me think of mine.

I highly recommend this work. If you have enjoyed any of the quotations in this review, I urge you to pick it up and give it a go. This essay is filled with them.

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## Johnny says

This is a short-ish collection of prose poems on Chicago in the early 20th century through to the edge of the

Daley-era. This book is important if just for that moment it occupies: I think today it's hard to be in Chicago and imagine it pre-Daley, and I use the word imagine with all the etymological baggage: to literally create an image of the city.

Algren will give you some of that. Everything about his Chicago exists down, as in down alleys and down in the urban canyon created by rising buildings. There's Chicago's heart: amongst the useless nobodies and no names. "You can never truly love [Chicago] till you can love its alleys too." An eminently Chicago moment: talking about loving Chicago, and talking about alleys. Chicagoans love both of those things, and in the grand NYC - LA - CHI - Everyone Else debate, Chicago always sets up shop in the working class corner. Algren spends this book not just setting up shop, but digging out a foundation, laying brickwork, and throwing rocks at everyone that walks by: everywhere is done, and he calls Detroit a "a parking lot about a stadium" (mid-Century urban renewal burn!).

But at the root of it all is the engine that propels so much of Chicago love and Chicago discussion forward: the inferiority complex. Again and again, he drags in the names of Paris and San Francisco and New York and Rome and everywhere. Babylon, Troy, name it, its here. A city that cannot exist outside of the contexts of the Global City and how it compares. How spurned is Algren by the sense of abandonment by Wright, who fled to France? How lonely does he feel in a city he claims had a glorious output in the past but has sputtered into artistic malaise ca. 1961 now? How much does he try to transform the hulking metropolis into more than a boy amongst men? A lot.

It's an old hat thing now, or maybe not even old hat, but the thing. This quest for authenticity and prominence and bigness, but in the quest trying hard to not bruise it, ever mad at the always happeningness of change. 1961 Algren is sad that an old German beer garden was replaced by a cocktail lounge. And here I am, 2017, sad that that shabby cocktail lounge was replaced by a beer garden.

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## **Kate says**

An epic prose poem about Chicago that celebrates all that is good and bad in our city. A slim book that makes the most out of every single word written. With a wonderful introduction by Studs Terkel and a brilliant afterword by Algren himself, I found that once I got started I had a hard time putting it down.

I loved Algren's use of colorful language and felt that he made many statements that still hold true today. Such as: "The hard necessity of bringing the judge on the bench down into the dock has been the particular responsibility of the writer in all ages of man. In Chicago, in our own curious span, we have seesawed between blind assault and blind counter-assault, hanging men in one decade for beliefs which, in another, we honor others."

Algren is a witty, smart man, and a wonderful writer. I hope to read his short stories and fiction next.

A must read for all Chicagoans as well as history and literature buffs.

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## **Alice says**

*"By days when the wind bangs alley gates ajar and the sun goes by on the wind. By nights when the moon is*

*an only child above the measured thunder of the cars, you may know Chicago's heart at last."*

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### **Emily says**

'It isn't hard to love a town for its greater and its lesser towers, its pleasant parks or its flashing ballet. Or for its broad and bending boulevards, where the continuous headlights follow, one dark driver after the next, one swift car after another, all night, all night and all night. But you never truly love it till you can love its alleys too. Where the bright and morning faces of old familiar friends now wear the anxious midnight eyes of strangers a long way from home.'

One of my favorite quotes. And a great encapsulation of a complex town.

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### **William Strasse says**

Sadly, reading this book only reinforced to me that, for better or worse, the old Chicago is a thing of the past...much like Vegas, it is an image to be sold to tourists but the reality is a sanitized version of something that hasn't existed for a long time. I guess that is the world we live in, in general...everything sanitized for our protection to the point where there is very little that is real anymore. What Chicago has gained in user-friendliness, it has lost in personality. Yes, if you know where to look, it's all still here and some things never change...but you have to look very hard these days to understand what made Chicago what it was. I don't think a lot of the people living here now can appreciate it either. I caught a glimpse of it when I lived here before from 98 - 02, but it was fading even then and has faded more now. A couple of points, though: Politics is still a very much a way of everyday life in Chicago and to be honest, Algren's romanticism of the "bad old Chicago" is tedious and corny to me at times. One thing that Algren does get right that I don't expect will ever change is that once you've lived here a while, you will love this old whore of a town more than she can ever love you (paraphrased/juxtaposed from several of the author's own words...although I don't think he ever calls her an old whore...that's all me. And, while I'm at it, loving her too much can be detrimental to your health.)

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### **Gavin Breeden says**

I was expecting this to be an informational book about Chicago's history up until the early 1950s (when it was published) and it was recommended all over the web as one of the best books about Chicago. But this is actually a prose-poem about Chicago written by one who grew up there. It reads a bit like Shakespeare in that Algren uses so much antiquated slang and he references so many people and places that only Chicagoans would recognize that I had to constantly flip to the helpful endnotes for explanations. Algren has a tough, punchy writing style that takes a bit of getting used to but ultimately gives the prose its poetic feel. I appreciated the writing but didn't really learn much about Chicago.

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### **Dina says**

I'm not sure how to rate this one. I believe I am going to have to read it again. And then read it again. This is

my first time reading Algren, which I think is a crime when I have lived in Chicago my whole life. Any life-long Chicagoan must read Algren. Otherwise are you really a Chicagoan? I read the preface, the essay, the afterword and even the editor's biographies in *Chicago: City on the Make*, but I do believe I will need to read it again. Why? Well, frankly, I had difficulty penetrating Algren's thick, weighty, poetic prose. There's so much imagery and metaphor in this work I got lost in understanding what was really being explored. What Algren was really writing about. Don't get me wrong: I know what he was writing about, but the details of his history, the details of the knock-down, drag-out events he depicts, I couldn't altogether follow. It is almost TOO poetic...I almost feel shut out, rather than welcomed in like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. But: perhaps that was Algren's intention all along. I mean, isn't that what Chicago is? A home where ultimately you sleep outside the front door? This edition provides amazing assistance with the notes in the back, but ultimately I found myself simultaneously embracing and fighting with Algren's prose. This essay is greatness, and my love of greatness, especially Chicago greatness, warrants an additional read. Then to read it again.

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### **Andrew Shaffer says**

I did not realize this was a "prose poem," whatever the fuck that is. DNF.

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### **Sam says**

"'Watch out for yourself' is still the word. 'What can I do for you?' still means 'What can you do for me?' around these parts—and that's supposed to make this the most American of cities too. It's always been an artist's town and it's always been a torpedo's town, the most artistic characters in the strong-arm industry as well as the world's most muscular poets get that way just by growing up in Chicago—and that's an American sort of arrangement too they tell us.

"A town where the artist of class and the swifter-type thief approach their work with the same lofty hope of slipping a fast one over on everybody and making a fast buck to boot. 'If he can get away with it I give the man credit,' is said here of both bad poets and good safe-blowers. Write, paint or steal the town blind—so long as you make your operation pay off you'll count nothing but dividends and hear nothing but cheers.

"Up, down and lurching sidewise—small wonder we're such a Johnson of a joint. Small wonder we've had trouble growing up.

"The very toughest sort of town, they'll tell you—that's what makes it so American.

"Yet it isn't any tougher at heart than the U.S.A. is tough at heart, for all her ships at sea. It just acts with the nervous violence of the two-timing bridegroom whose guilt is more than he can bear: the bird who tries to throw his bride off the scent by accusing her of infidelity loudly enough for the neighbors to hear. The guiltier he feels the louder he talks. That's the sort of little loud talker we have in Chicago today. He isn't a tough punk, he's just a scared one. Americans everywhere face gunfire better than guilt.

"Making this not only the home park of the big soap-chip and sausage-stuffing tycoons, the home cave of the juke-box giants and the mail-order dragons, the knot that binds the TV waves to the airplanes and the railroad ties to the sea, but also the psychological nerve center where the pang goes deepest when the whole country

is grinding its teeth in a nightmare sleep.

"There, unheard by the millions who ride the waves above and sleep, and sleep and dream, night after night after night, loving and well-beloved, guarding and well guarded, beats the great city's troubled heart."

And on, and on. A beautiful and loving ode and indictment to this miserable city.

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## **Brad Lyerla says**

Chicago has a tradition of romanticizing its hustlers, working girls and petty crooks. Mike Royko and Studs Terkel were award-winning writers and younger contemporaries of Algren who contributed to that tradition too. But *CITY ON THE MAKE*, written shortly after Algren received the National Book Award for *THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM*, took the romanticization of Chicago's street smart sharpsters and corrupt politicians to heights achieved by no one else. *CITY ON THE MAKE* is short (87 pages) and more poetry than essay. It depicts Chicago in a manner reflecting a hard-calloused sensibility that went out of fashion after Vietnam and Watergate. Although *CITY ON THE MAKE* was regarded favorably by the critics in New York City and was praised lavishly in France where it was first translated by Jean Paul Sartre, it fell flat in Chicago itself. The local gentry did not like the mirror that Algren held up to their city.

As a long time resident of Chicago, I did not love *CITY ON THE MAKE* either -- but, of course, I read it 60 years after the fact. To me, it coasts lazily on stereotypes resulting in a one dimensional depiction of a city that is far deeper and more complex than anything Algren even hints at in this short book.

There are four more thoughts that I want to share in this review. First, Algren assumes a lot from his readers. There are many references to obscure Chicago people and facts that are likely to be unfamiliar to most readers. Without the background, however, a reader may not fully enjoy Algren's sly side-swipes at Chicago's many hypocrites, past and present.

Second, in the edition that I read, an Afterword is included. The Afterword was written by Algren himself in 1961, for a 10 year anniversary edition of the book. Algren's Afterword is not gracious. He seems to have written it in part to settle the score with those who had panned *CITY ON THE MAKE* when it was first published in 1951. He makes little effort to disguise his anger or his motives. That failure does not reflect well on him.

Third, Algren is at his most entertaining when he reminisces about his childhood and the summer his family moved from the south side to the north side. He was a White Sox fan, and had to defend his honor and his favorite player, Swede Risberg, a chief conspirator in the then recent Black Sox scandal.

Finally, Algren is at his most interesting when he bemoans the quality of literature being created in Chicago in the period immediately after WWII. He remembers earlier times when Farrell, Ferber, Lonigan, Wright and others were writing the books that caused Mencken to call out Chicago as the city in America where the only books worth reading were being written. Yet, Algren himself and, a few years later, Saul Bellow were among the best of their generation . . .

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## Jo says

I'm from Sydney. I spent a few days in Chicago once and think about the place often. It was unlike any other city I'd been to, landlocked yet on a shoreline, soulful yet missing something, giant art deco Metropolis-esque skyscrapers everywhere but with strangely deserted streets between them. None of the locals would give me a straight answer to the question: "Where is everybody?" I spent a few days cycling around Lake Michigan with a Swiss guy I met, and at one point, as we stopped to watch an enigmatic single rose floating on the water, he said "I think I love this city." I agree, and I will go back one day to figure out why. How strange to read this beautifully written book and realise how much Sydney and Chicago have in common.

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## Keith Schnell says

I recently re-read this, which only reinforced my opinion that *Chicago: City on the Make* is one of the finest works of prose poetry in English, and really demonstrates Nelson Algren at the height of his powers, both in terms of his mastery of composition and, perhaps more importantly still, his moral and philosophical self-confidence. This last point is important: in 1951 Algren still thought that he could change Americans' minds, or at least make a lasting and widely understood statement in a way that he felt was equivalent to that done by those he considered his peers, most notably Simone de Beauvoir, in a way that he had largely given up on by the later 60s and 70s.

Algren, especially in the late 40s and early 50s, was writing in a transitional period in American history between the interwar and Depression era that was his formative period and the setting for many of his major works, and the more affluent but alienated and culturally dead period of the early Cold War – between H-Bomb and A, if you will. *Chicago: City on the Make*, straddles this period, especially when one includes the excellent *Afterward*, written in 1961. At times, it can be hard to relate this America to ours – concerns about whether an increasingly affluent 1950s population would lose touch with its democratic and humanist values, or at least its more benign and down-to-earth form of hustle, can seem distant in an era when median family incomes have not grown in most readers' lifetimes. But ultimately his grasp of the American psyche, his focus on the city's more timeless personae, and his willingness to transcend any one era make this meditation on the soul of an American city and the American people more relevant than those of Steinbeck or Dos Passos. Really only Hunter S Thompson came as close, and then only rarely.

Writing prior to Vietnam, and indeed prior to a long series of wars since Vietnam, the following passage really gets at the timelessness of what *Chicago: City on the Make* is getting at:

"You can see the boys who stopped caring in 1918 under the city arc-lamps yet. Under the tall lamps yet. An evening comes taxiing in and the jungle hidlers come softly forth: geeks and gargoyles, old blown winoes, sour stewbums and grinning ginsoaks, young dingbats who went ashore on D Plus One or D Plus Two and have been trying to find some arc-lit shore ever since . . . Fresh from the gathering of snipes behind the nearest KEEP OFF warnings come the forward patrols of tomorrow. Every Day is D-Day under the El. By highway and byway, along old rag-tattered walls, surprised while coming up in the grass by the trolley's green-fire flare, their faces reveal, in that ash-green flash, a guilt never their very own. Upon the backstreets of some postwar tomorrow, when the city is older yet, these too shall live by night."

