



City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America

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The epic of Chicago is the story of the emergence of modern America. Here, witness Chicago's growth from a desolate fur-trading post in the 1830s to one of the world's most explosively alive cities by 1900.

Donald Miller's powerful narrative embraces it all: Chicago's wild beginnings, its reckless growth, its natural calamities (especially the Great Fire of 1871), its raucous politics, its empire-building businessmen, its world-transforming architecture, its rich mix of cultures, its community of young writers and journalists, and its staggering engineering projects -- which included the reversal of the Chicago River and raising the entire city from prairie mud to save it from devastating cholera epidemics. The saga of Chicago's unresolved struggle between order and freedom, growth and control, capitalism and community, remains instructive for our time, as we seek ways to build and maintain cities that retain their humanity without losing their energy. City of the Century throbs with the pulse of the great city it brilliantly brings to life.

City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America Details

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From Reader Review City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America for online ebook

Janis says

I was entirely absorbed by this book, which chronicles the rise and fall (and rise and fall) of Chicago from the explorations of Marquette and Joliet and its inception as a fur-trading outpost through the class struggles of the Pullman strikes in 1894. Donald Miller drew such thorough and fascinating pictures of each era that with every chapter I wished that I could go back in time to experience the Chicago he described.

Luis Roberto Reyes Romero says

An epic journey through the birth of Chicago. Cities are, in my view, man's most important invention and in this book, we see one of the world's greatest cities being created from nothing in less than 50 years. At some point, Chicago was the second biggest city in the world and it looked poised to surpass New York in might and influence. We all know that didn't happen.

In this history of the city, my city, for now, I find cues into the issues that stopped Chicago from realizing its manifest destiny and are taking it now to, relative and potentially absolute, irrelevance.

Overall a great book that leaves me loving the past and well as the present of Chicago. As for the future, well that's a different story

Alice Lemon says

I was honestly a little surprised by how much I ended up liking this book. The beginning of it felt oddly old-fashioned: the descriptions of Marquette and Joliet's expedition to the northern Mississippi felt like it belonged in an earlier generation of history books. However, as the book went on, it felt more modern and, in particular, did a really good job of covering the labor movement and the plight of working-class Chicagoans.

I was quite happy with Miller's prose, and his imagery in describing the city. I found that I learned a lot of interesting things from the book, not just about Chicago but about Nineteenth Century American urban life in general, some of which I would like to find books on to read more. Particularly noteworthy was the discussion of the transition of American white-collar work from being the domain of general-purpose clerks who became familiar with the operations of a business and could often make the jump from clerical work to management to being the domain of much-less-skilled, usually female, secretaries and typists, supplemented by vertical filing cabinets and standardized filing systems.

Another topic I found interesting was the discussion of the class consequences of Sunday closing laws. I'd always understood Sunday closing laws for businesses (particularly taverns) and the closing of cultural institutions on Sundays to have been a matter of Christian fundamentalists trying to enforce their morality on society. However, it also had a significant classism component: blue-collar workers usually worked ten hours a day, six days a week, and Sunday was their only day off. Closing taverns on Sundays was often intended as a way to keep them from drinking, as much as it was motivated by religious morality. Likewise, a number of

cultural institutions in Nineteenth Century Chicago apparently closed their doors on Sundays with a fairly explicit goal of keeping out the unwashed.

Stephanie says

I made it 121 pages and had to give up. It's not a bad book, so far pretty good, I'm just not in the headspace for a history of rich white men right now. Maybe some day I'll try it again

Richard Brown says

City of the Century is a well-conceived comprehensive survey of the social, economic, and political factors that led to the rapid development of Chicago in the nineteenth century. I'm familiar with the city and found the history interesting and learned some new things about the city. Those who don't have a particular interest in Chicago, however, may have a harder time getting through this book that sometimes gets bogged down in detail. Although the book covered the period from Joliet and Marquette's exploration of the area that became Chicago up to the Columbian Exposition of 1893, about two-thirds of the book was concentrated on the last two decades of the 19th century. I think Professor Miller should have given more attention to the earlier period, and he could have eliminated much of the lengthy explanation related to architecture and construction of various buildings. I had a hard time keeping my eyes open through that. However, the last section of the book in which the author delved into the conflicts and issues pitting the entrenched protestant old guard and the newer immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe, captured my attention. His description of the deplorable conditions of the immigrants, the exploitation by those in power, and the social changes underway as reflected in news reports and social commentaries was deeply moving. It was hard to escape the relevance of the social divisions of the 19th century to current conditions in America, where race, ethnicity, and national origin continue to be explosive elements impacting American society, both for good and for ill.

Tanya says

I plowed through this dense history of Chicago over the past week in preparation for my trip to the Windy City. I wouldn't say it was *enjoyable*, but it was very educational! Chicago is unique in that it went from a muddy frontier outpost to a world class city in the space of 50 years, so I really wanted to understand how this came about.

Chicago, plain and simple, is a child of capitalism. It didn't grow by the banks of the river because it was an ideal location for a city, but because the retreating glaciers and the general geography of America made it an ideal hub for the nation's fledgling railroad system. Nearly every industry in the area, whether it be meat packing, McCormick's reapers, steelyards, Pullman's railroad cars, or even construction arose directly out of this fact. A coalition of ambitious and determined men recognized this early on, and devoted their careers to the realization of urban creation.

But a paradise for industry does not a utopia make. Chicago quickly became the most unhealthy city in

America, and it wasn't until 1900 with the completion of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal that they even had clean water! Poverty and vice were also a huge problem in 19th century Chicago, especially among the huge immigrant population, most notably from Germany and Ireland. This led to political corruption on an unbelievable scale, and played a large role in the labor strikes of the late 1800s. The sections of Miller's large (I know I keep emphasizing how long the book is, but it's big and heavy and packed a lot of words on every page!) tome that dealt with these topics I found very interesting.

I was less interested in the long section on the city's architecture. I know this is a big draw for visitors to Chicago, and I can appreciate that this is the birthplace of the skyscraper, but I'm just not that interested in architectural innovations! I also had to push harder to get through the details of Chicago's big businessmen and the growth of their corporations. It just goes to reinforce that I'm a social historian at heart.

I'm sure a lot happened in Chicago in the 20th century, but this particular book is about the *making* of Chicago, and only gives glimpses of the city past 1900. Other authors will have to write those pages, and maybe I'll read them another time...

So... if you, like me, plan to visit Chicago and like to do massive amounts of research beforehand, then this is the book for you. Otherwise, you will probably be all right to skip it! But I'm still giving it 4 stars for being a comprehensive, well-researched, and solid history. Now I get to go enjoy the real thing!!

Rosa says

I gained much knowledge about my hometown by reading this. I knew the general history but not all of the details. The recent shutdown of a political candidate's visit made me proud of my city & as I am miles away from visiting there at the present moment, needed a reminder of all I love about the Windy City. This was sufficient....for now. ;)

Lauren Hiebner says

A well written history of Chicago from its founding, the challenges of building city infrastructure, the Chicago fire, to the 1893 Exposition. Miller also gives a brief biography of all the people that made Chicago truly the "first American city."

Patrick Smith says

I read the first 75% or so of this book last year and then I couldn't find my kindle charger, started reading other things and just finally got back to finishing it. I don't think it would be as enjoyable for people that don't live in Chicago but I loved it and learned a lot. My favorite part was learning my streets and places have the names they do. If you want to have a bunch of fun facts to impress and eventually annoy your friends and/or significant others when you're out and about around the city this is the book for you.

Becky says

This audiobook was a good way to get to know Chicago history focused on the 19th century while also getting to know the mythology around Chicago -- the brashness, the big shoulders, the ambition, the muscular bravado. It focused a little more on the "great men" of Chicago than I would have liked -- of course these are all white settler men -- but it did point out the contradictions of the unbridled capitalism that characterized early Chicago and the resulting mass labor movements. The ending felt abrupt -- I wanted to hear about the 20th century too but that would have been a very, very long book.

Wade says

A Fantastic Voyage into Chicago's History

Grab my hand and step onto this river tug, this workhorse that takes you through Chicago's history. This is perhaps one of the best traditional histories I've ever read. The elegant way in which we are taken from the founding of Chicago to the Pullman Strike is just delightful I kept wondering how he'd cover this or that but he slides into new topics like smooth sherbet. As a Chicago land native I learned a tremendous amount about my homeland and reinforced that you can't understand the history of America without Chicago.

Brittney says

Excellent historical account of the building of Chicago. Each chapter had its own general theme but were structured similarly. This is definitely a 'history book' with little narrative content, but is interesting enough to keep most entertained. I would recommend focusing on the chapters that seem most interesting to you, or else the book might become overwhelming. I found myself reading certain sections a lot closer and more detailed than others, simply so I wasn't flooded with too much information. The beauty of this book was that you could do that - skim some parts and carefully read others - and still get a good picture of its overall history.

Adrian Buck says

Superb, and very similar in form to Budapest 1900. But more emphasis is given to the impact of technology in the development of the world's first industrial metropolis (Manchester?). I for one needed to know the role of the typewriter in the opening up of clerical work to women, the consequences of which the industrial world is still living with: and failing to address.

Maggie Needham says

Here are some things I learned from this book:

- They have to literally lift up all the buildings one time to put in a sewage system and everyone went out to watch the buildings rise like a foot off the ground????

- Saloons used to have free lunches!!!!
- The population grew so quickly I can't imagine living somewhere the changed so much over the course of a lifetime.
- Frank Lloyd Wright said that "The Art Institute is a stupid building."
- Ida B. Wells is rad af I need to read more about her.

Peter says

A sprawling, comprehensive history of Chicago in the 19th Century, when the city rose from a swampy trading post to one of the greatest industrial metropolises of the world. My only reservation is that I've already read about many of Miller's major subjects (Pullman, the stockyards, the 1893 World's Fair, Jane Addams) in book-length studies elsewhere, so much of this wasn't new to me. Still, his sections on early French exploration, the first white settlers, architecture and journalists were quite interesting to me.
