

Chicago and Its Authors

H E N R Y R E G N E R Y

THERE HAVE BEEN, not surprisingly, far more Chicago authors than publishers. What, one may ask, makes an author a Chicago author? A Chicago publisher, obviously, is someone, wherever he may have come from originally or later have gone, who publishes books in Chicago. But, then, consider the case of Sherwood Anderson, who was born in Ohio, came to Chicago in his thirties where he wrote, among others, his best known book, *Winesburg, Ohio*, and then, having achieved success as a writer, moved to Virginia where he owned two newspapers. Should he be considered a Chicago writer? James T. Farrell was born and is buried in Chicago and the presence of Chicago is apparent in his best known book, *Studs Lonigan*, but he wrote most, if not all, of his books in New York. Then there is Saul Bellow, who, while not born in Chicago, grew up here, graduated from Northwestern and is now on the faculty of the University of Chicago. I don't detect much or any influence of Chicago in the books of his I have read but if he is not a Chicago author, what is he? I would consider Hamlin Garland a Chicago author, although he lived almost as long in Boston as in Chicago: the strong influences on his work are of the Middle Border, as he called it, of which Chicago is the center; he did much of his best work here, and he left his mark on Chicago. The definition of a Chicago author, it seems clear, is purely subjective.

While Chicago has never been such a literary center as was Boston, for example, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it has experienced two rather spectacular, if also short, creative literary periods, the first from about 1890 to 1910, and the second beginning about the time of World War I and lasting into the 1930s. The first Chicago writers to win national attention made their start on local newspapers: Eugene Field in his *Sharps and Flats* col-

umn in the *Daily News*, Finley Peter Dunne's lampoons of politicians in his *Mr. Dooley* series in the *Chicago Post*, and George Ade's *Stories of the Streets and of the Town* in the *Daily News*. The newspaper, in a world without television or radio, movies or cars, occupied a far more influential position as a source of information and news, as a medium of entertainment and as a cultural influence than does the newspaper of today. It is not surprising that such gifted young men as George Ade, coming to the city from Indiana, or Eugene Field from Missouri, would have gravitated to newspaper work and that their success as newspaper writers brought them national recognition. Eugene Field, having worked on newspapers in St. Louis and Denver, was brought to Chicago in 1883 by Melville Stone, the founder of the *Chicago Daily News*, to become associated with his paper; Ade, apparently, came on his own to join his friend John McCutcheon.

Chicago in the 1890s may not have been the literary and cultural center Boston considered itself to be, but enough was going on here to induce Hamlin Garland, who was by then a respected and successful writer, to leave Boston to establish himself in Chicago. He spent some time in Chicago in 1892, when preparations for the World's Fair gave him the impression of a vital and creative city. Coming back to Chicago the following year, when the World's Fair was in full swing, Garland decided to give up his associations with Boston and move to Chicago.

The Chicago World's Fair was without doubt the catalyst that set off this "flare of esthetic enthusiasm," as Garland called it, but the Fair itself was the culmination of a wave of creative achievement that followed the Great Fire of 1871. It is instructive to recall how many of the cultural institutions of Chicago were started during the period

from 1871 to 1900: the Art Institute was incorporated in 1879, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the present University of Chicago in 1891, the Field Museum in 1893, the Newberry Library in 1887, and the Crerar Library in 1895. The Public Library was founded in 1872, the year following the fire, and the fine library building on Michigan between Randolph and Washington was built in 1894.

Besides a few aspiring writers and much enthusiasm, Chicago at that time had two other necessary elements to become a literary center: a number of discerning critics and several energetic and imaginative publishers. One of the best and most respected literary magazines in the country was then published in Chicago, the *Dial*; the newspapers took a lively interest in books and literary matters—Eugene Field's column *Sharps and Flats* is a good example—and there were several active book publishers, the most creative, Stone & Kimball, but A. C. McClurg was publishing books in those days, as was Rand, McNally, and there were others, Way & Williams, and Francis Schulte, who had published Opie Reed and Ambrose Bierce. Critics don't, as a rule, even pay for their books, but they can play an enormously important role in establishing reputations and in making the work of an author known to the public. So far as the author and publisher are concerned, they are the most visible and apparent audience for their wares; they may do so against their wills, but authors, to some degree at least, write to please the critics, and publishers, for better or for worse, are influenced in their choice of books by the critics. The level of writing at any time is strongly influenced by the level of criticism; if you think that fiction at the moment is at a particularly low ebb, look to the reviewers, but Chicago, at the time I am speaking of, possessed some competent critics.

Eugene Field was brought to Chicago by Mellville Stone, the founder of the *Chicago Daily News*, to work on his paper. When Stone's son, Herbert S. Stone, in partnership with his Harvard classmate Hannibal Ingalls Kimball, Jr., set up the publishing

firm of Stone & Kimball, Eugene Field lent them the prestige of his name by writing the introduction for their first book, *First Editions of American Authors*, which they published in 1893. Before his early death in 1895, Stone & Kimball published two more books by Eugene Field, *The Holy Cross and Other Tales*, and his translation, with his brother, of Horace's *Sabine Farm*.

The first book of George Ade, *Artie, A Story of the Streets and Town*, was published by Stone & Kimball, as were four subsequent books; then, his reputation made, he went to New York. The publishing office of Stone & Kimball, after 1900 known as Herbert S. Stone & Company, became a gathering place for people seriously interested in literature and good writing, somewhat as Hamlin Garland describes the office of the book review editor of the *Boston Transcript* in the 1880s; the bookstores of Chicago, McClurg's, for example, which were then bookstores in the traditional sense rather than supermarkets, were also a creative and stimulating influence, and brought writers and readers together. Vincent Starret once remarked that the writers left Chicago when the small bookstores disappeared. Creative people not only need the stimulation of other creative people, they need to be aware that there is a receptive and understanding audience for what they are trying to do. Chicago, during its first creative outburst, seems to have been able to supply these necessary elements.

Hamlin Garland will never be considered one of the great American writers, I am sure, but he was an honest writer, had learned his craft well, and what he wrote about he knew from first-hand experience. The fact that he was already an established and nationally recognized writer when he decided to settle in Chicago in 1893 contributed substantially to the creative literary period that followed. By entrusting the publication of four of his books, beginning with *Main-Travelled Roads*, to the new firm of Stone & Kimball, whose principals were inexperienced and still in their early twenties, he gave the new firm immediate recognition and contributed im-

measurably to its ultimate success. Only someone who has himself launched a publishing firm will understand how helpful it is to be able to offer the work of an established and recognized author. In his excellent history of Stone & Kimball, Sidney Kramer remarks, "Hamlin Garland's books were the rock on which the firm was founded."

Garland was born on a Wisconsin farm, near West Salem, in 1860; his father came from New England, from old American stock. He describes his father as a strong, indomitable man who was driven by an overwhelming urge to go west. He was a typical example of the men who opened the West to settlement. By the time Garland was in his early twenties, the family had pulled up stakes five times and had settled on six different farms. His father told him, he says in his autobiography, that the happiest moments of his life had been while driving a covered wagon across the unbroken prairie. Life was hard on the prairie. Garland describes, for example, how, at the age of ten and for ten hours a day, he plowed the sod that his uncle had broken the previous spring with a four-horse team; and the following year had the job of preparing it for seeding; hour after hour and day after day, with a drag. Hard as life was, Garland managed to acquire a solid education, and after a year or two in South Dakota, their final stopping place, he decided that he had had enough of blizzards and arctic weather in the winter and drouth and searing heat in the summer, and made up his mind to go to Boston to prepare himself for a different kind of life—teaching, if nothing better came along, but he hoped writing and lecturing. His father had lived for a time in Boston before going west, and had often described it to his family, and Garland and his brother had made a trip to New England a year or two before his final break, earning the money they needed along the way by working on farms, shingling roofs, or whatever they could find.

He left for Boston on his final trip with just \$200 in his pocket, money he had gotten from the sale of a claim to a quarter

section of South Dakota land; with this, he thought, by dint of extreme care, he could get through the winter in Boston and, with luck, establish himself. His dingy attic room cost him \$2 a week, he had no overcoat, wore the same threadbare suit every day, and ate barely enough to keep him alive, but he managed to hear Edwin Booth play many of the tragedies of Shakespeare, he read hungrily and systematically, and took every possible opportunity to develop himself. In a surprisingly short time he was hired to lecture at the Boston School of Oratory, a respected private academy, and started to review books for the *Boston Transcript*. A review of a book by William Dean Howells attracted the attention of the editor, who arranged for Garland to meet Howells himself. Howells took an interest in the young man, advised him, and helped him to establish himself as a writer. It was in 1886 that Garland left his parents' South Dakota farm, unknown and without connections of any kind. When he left Boston seven years later to settle in Chicago, he was an established and respected writer.

Garland was much influenced by the ideas of Herbert Spencer and Henry George, and in his approach to writing by Walt Whitman and William Dean Howells. In his autobiography he explains why he decided to leave Boston and to devote himself as a writer to the life he knew and felt to be a part of his nature—the farm life of the "Middle Border." He loved Boston and New England, the neat villages with their white houses, shaded streets, and spired churches, but was never able to feel that he was a part of it. "My return to Boston in November," he wrote in *Son of the Middle Border*, "discovered a startling change in my relationship to it. The shining city in which I had lived for seven years, and which had become so familiar to me (and so necessary to my progress), had begun to dwindle, to recede. The warm, broad, unkempt and tumultuous west, with its clamorous movement, its freedom from tradition, its vitality of political thought, reasserted its power over me."

He lectured for the single taxers and became active in the populist movement which swept the prairies in the 80s and 90s of the last century in response to 10¢ wheat and 15-percent mortgage money, but he soon began to devote his energies largely to writing, and following a trip to the West, when he was able to visit his parents, he made up his mind to describe farm life as it was, with all its unremitting toil and drabness. "I resumed my writing," he explains in his autobiography, "in a mood of bitter resentment, with full intention of telling the truth about western farm life, irrespective of the land-boomer or the politicians." He sold the first such story to the *Arena*, a new, rather radical (for those days) review published in Boston, and soon after another to the *Century*, then a magazine of considerable prestige. The publisher of the *Arena* suggested that he collect a group of such stories for publication in book form, a suggestion Garland gladly accepted. *Main-Travelled Roads: Six Mississippi Valley Stories* was published in 1891, Garland's first book, and brought forth a storm of protest; tilling the prairie soil, one of his critics asserted, was "the noblest vocation in the world, not in the least like the picture this eastern author has drawn of it." Garland responded, "I will not lie, even to be a patriot. A proper proportion of the sweat, flies, heat, dirt and drudgery of it all shall go in. I am a competent witness and I intend to tell the whole truth." His mother agreed that he had, and added, "You might have said more, but I'm glad you didn't. Farmers' wives have enough to bear as it is." In 1893 a new edition was brought out by Stone & Kimball, who reprinted it three times. Subsequent editions were published by Macmillan and Harper.

While Garland was determined to describe prairie farm life as it was, not omitting the sweat, dirt, and drudgery, he was not, by any means, oblivious of its joys nor of the beauties of the countryside: the periodical visit of the circus, Grange picnics, family parties, which included much singing and music, for the Garlands were a musical family, the threshing of the grain

and the feeling of companionship and accomplishment that went with it, are all beautifully and movingly described.

There was a very lively and amusing exchange, during that summer of the World's Fair, between Hamlin Garland and his good friend Eugene Field, a convinced romanticist and outspoken opponent of the realists of his day. This took place in Field's column in the *Daily News*. Field opened the battle by declaring that he stood with Mary Hartwell Catherwood who "believes with us in fairy godmothers and beautiful princesses who have fallen victims to wicked old witches. Mr. Garland's heroes sweat and do not wear socks; his heroines eat cold huckleberry pie and are so unfeminine as not to call a cow 'he'." In his reply, Garland referred to the romanticists as the "aristocratic party in literature," and assured his followers that "realism or veritism or Americanism (at bottom these words mean practically the same thing) is on the increase. We are in the minority, we admit, but we're fighters and we've got truth on our side." The battle was soon joined by Mrs. Catherwood herself, which was followed by an amusing warning from Field to his readers to prepare themselves for the imminent arrival on the scene of battle of the cause of all the trouble, William Dean Howells himself: "we advise the romanticists," he wrote, to 'watch out'."

Besides helping the new firm of Stone & Kimball, Garland used his influence and the prestige of his name in other ways to make Chicago the "publishing center and literary marketplace" he thought it might become when he visited the city in 1892. He was the founder of the Cliff Dwellers, which he hoped would become such a club as the Players in New York, a place where writers, painters, musicians, and others professionally involved in the arts might come together with people of similar interests, whether professionally or not. He was also instrumental in founding the Society of Midland Authors.

A contemporary and friend of Hamlin Garland whose authenticity as a Chicago writer cannot be questioned is Henry B.

Fuller, who was born and lived all his life in Chicago and drew the material from Chicago for some of his most successful books. His grandfather, who came from a New England "Mayflower" family, had been one of the early settlers of Chicago. In the 1890s it was unusual to meet anyone who was born in Chicago; Fuller was third generation. In his excellent book on Fuller's literary achievement, Bernard R. Bowron concludes: "... in Henry B. Fuller, America got its first novelist fully conscious of the need to make use of the post-Civil War American city as material for art—and capable of doing so." His first book to attract wide attention, and still one of the best remembered, is *The Cliff-Dwellers*, much of which takes place in one of the new, multistoried office buildings which were beginning to spring up in Chicago and, Fuller thought, in their completely impersonal quality, reflected the attitudes and values of their business inhabitants. The first part of the book is an account of the activities of a group of men involved in banking and real estate, the last part describes the social climbing efforts of their wives; as Bowron puts it, "the social behaviour of the American middle-class woman has rarely been subjected to a more knowing and ironic gaze."

Coming out during the summer of the World's Fair, Chicago's great triumph, Fuller's picture of Chicago businessmen and aspiring society matrons was regarded by many as close to traitorous, but the *Dial* gave it a cordial, friendly reception—"an alert and unsentimental depiction of everyday life in the newest great city of the New World." The review concluded with the comment, "His book seems to us to have no less value as a document than interest as a story." The reviewer in *Life* concluded a rather long and generally favorable review with the opinion that Fuller had "overestimated the power of circumstances to bend character and upset integrity." The *Chicago Post*, which for many years took pride in the high quality of its literary criticism, reviewed the book at some length, and generally favorably, but felt that its greatest defect was "its utter want

of personal sympathy between the author and any one of his characters." The *Post* also ran a piece on William Dean Howells' review of the book.

One can make a case, I think, that there is a definite line of development from Garland and Fuller through Theodore Dreiser to the later "Chicago realists," such people, that is to say, as Floyd Dell, Ben Hecht, James T. Farrell, and Nelson Algren. Dreiser was born in Terre Haute, Indiana in 1871 and came to Chicago in 1887. His first job was in a restaurant, and his last, before leaving Chicago, a reporter on the *Chicago Globe*. After a year or two in St. Louis, where he was drama editor for the *Globe-Democrat*, he went to New York—this was in 1895—and it is there that he wrote his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, which grew out of his Chicago experience and was published in 1900. Bowron quotes Dreiser as having called Fuller "the vanguard of the New Realism," which he probably was, but the gap between, say, James T. Farrell of *Studs Lonigan* and Henry Fuller is a wide one, to say nothing of the distance between Farrell and Garland.

Farrell, I am sure, undertook to describe the life of his southside-Chicago Irish characters honestly and as he remembered them, but they are not, in my opinion, real people—they are automatons rather than human beings. One reviewer criticized Fuller for overestimating "the power of circumstances to bend character and upset integrity," and it is a criticism that may well have been justified, and to the extent that it makes Fuller all the more "the vanguard of Realism." But Fuller never went so far as to absolve his characters, because of their circumstances, of responsibility for their acts; they are still moral beings, which Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* is not. Garland's farm women, old before their time and burdened with the endless drudgery of cooking, sewing, sweeping, and with children tugging at them, were, in a way, victims of their circumstances, but Garland would have been incensed at the idea that they were powerless to rise above their circumstances or were in-

capable of making moral judgments. Farrell's Studs Lonigan is dimly aware of moral standards, has learned the Ten Commandments, even goes to confession, more out of fear, to be sure, than conviction, but he is unable to do more with his life than to go from one mess to another, and eventually destroys himself.

Garland and Fuller may not have believed in Eugene Field's fairy godmother, but they did believe that man has the power to make moral choices and is responsible for his own acts. The later Chicago realists, on the other hand, are determinists, and in this they were doubtless strongly influenced by the teachings of Marx and Freud. Floyd Dell, as a matter of fact, went to New York to become editor of the *Masses*, and James T. Farrell to become a Trotskyite. Farrell's point of view illustrated by *Studs Lonigan*; a later character of his, Danny O'Neill, does try to rise above his circumstances. An old friend of Farrell's, John Chamberlain, tells me, "Jim fought well against the Stalinists in the literary wars of the thirties."

Both Garland and Fuller were reformers in the sense that they hoped by their writing to improve society—in Fuller's case by exposing dishonest and unethical behavior in business and in Garland's by describing the unfair burden placed upon the farmer. The realist, however, in the strict logic of his position cannot be a reformer: if everything is determined by circumstances and passion there is no way to improve matters. It was doubtless Farrell's intention in *Studs Lonigan* to show the sordidness and emptiness of the lives of his southside-Chicago Irish and the extent to which they were victims of their surroundings and biological drives, but I find it difficult to believe that in so doing he thought he might lead them to something better. One thing that particularly struck me about this book of eight hundred pages is its total lack of humor, and whatever the reviewer in the *Chicago Tribune* may have thought, that "even the most sensitive reader must feel a strange and terrific power," eight hundred pages without a

trace of humor about a crowd of obscene, empty-headed roughnecks is too much. Whether the lack of humor is characteristic of the realists I do not know, but I think that it may well be—Ben Hecht could have a light touch, but Dreiser is hardly remembered for his humor. Humor requires more understanding and human sympathy than a view of man as a helpless victim of his surroundings and passions.

Much has been written about the Chicago "renaissance," the period from about World War I into the thirties. Sherwood Anderson, Floyd Dell, Ben Hecht and Carl Sandburg, among others, were all writing books in Chicago in those days. Harriet Monroe, in her magazine *Poetry*, was discovering not only such local poets as Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg, but also T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound; Pascal Covici was doing some imaginative and creative publishing; Ben Hecht was getting out his *Chicago Literary Times*; Henry Fuller was still an influential member of the literary establishment of the city; and the newspapers could take justified pride in the quality of their book reviews. John Chamberlain, who was then writing book reviews for the *New York Times*, has this to say in his memoirs, *My Life with the Printed Word*, about the Chicago critics in what now, by comparison, appears to have been a golden age: "The newspaper critics in Chicago—Francis Hackett, Floyd Dell, Burton Rascoe and Harry Hanson—were the trumpet voices that brought novelists such as Sherwood Anderson and poets such as Carl Sandburg to the attention of the New York publishers." For a time, it was all very exciting, just as it had been during those brief years in the early 1890s, but only for a time. Ben Hecht soon went to Hollywood and New York; Burton Rascoe became editor of the *New York Herald-Tribune* book section; Sherwood Anderson moved to Virginia; Pascal Covici, after taking his publishing business to New York, became editor at Viking; Floyd Dell, as already noted, became editor of the *Masses*. But Chicago keeps producing, or attracting, new writers. Nelson Algren, although born in Detroit and having

taught in Iowa and Florida, must have found Chicago a congenial and stimulating place to work, since he spent much of his life here. His work, judging by the one book I have read, *Walk on the Wild Side*, is very much in the tradition of Chicago realists. He is not much to my taste, I must admit, but he is a skillful writer and much admired. Martha Heasley Cox, in the book *20th Century American Literature*, says of Algren: "Characters, themes, symbols, and imagery, as well as the Chicago settings, recur through his canon as he becomes the spokesman for the derelicts, professional tramps, prostitutes, addicts, convicts, prizefighters, and baseball players who inhabit his city jungle."

One Chicago writer I would like to remember was a gentle, kindly, unpretentious man named Leonard Dubkin who lived all his life in Chicago but in spite of that, never lost his love of nature, his sense of wonder for the mystery of life, and his uncanny ability to find something of beauty wherever he was. Seven books of his were published—how many more he may have written I do not know—the first, *Murmur of Wings*, in 1944, and the last *My Secret Places*, in 1972. I published one book, I am proud to say, *Natural History of a Yard*, in 1955, which is a beautiful account of the many mysterious and wonderful forms of life that are to be found, if one takes the trouble to look, in a city yard. In one of his books, *Wolf Point*, he describes how he found, on the tip of land at the branch of the Chicago River and a stone's throw from the Merchandise Mart, one of his "secret places."

Dubkin's books were not best-sellers, but all of them except his last, which was probably his best, were favorably reviewed. The book I published received excellent reviews in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*, and *White Lady*—which had as its center a very old tree that was completely covered by a huge vine, stood near the Northside Pumping Station, and was the nesting place of thousands of bats—was the subject of an article in *Time*. By the time his last book came out, in 1972, the generation of the sixties had

taken over book reviewing, a generation that seems to be obsessed with violence and sex, to the exclusion of everything else, including Leonard Dubkin.

And there is Harry Petrakis, who was born in St. Louis, grew up in Chicago—his father was the priest of a large Greek Orthodox parish on the southside of Chicago—and draws the materials for his stories from Chicago, but now lives across the lake in Indiana. When the American Greeks, after a few generations, have been integrated, equalized, secularized, and made ashamed of their heritage, which seems to be what those who dominate our cultural life intend for all of us, the wonderfully amusing and very human stories of Harry Petrakis will remain as a memorial to those strong-willed, vigorous, proud, and high-spirited people who came to this country from the land of Homer and Pericles.

Finally, there is Saul Bellow, who is certainly the most distinguished writer now in Chicago. In the fiction I have read—three novels and three short stories—nothing much seems to happen. There is little or no drama or action; the stories consist largely of conversation, reminiscence, reflection, musing, but all so skillfully and artfully put down that the reader is drawn in, feels himself to be a participant. A short story, "Mosby's Memoirs," involves a retired American professor who, with the benefit of a Guggenheim grant, is in Mexico, very comfortably situated, writing his memoirs. Professor Mosby has a striking resemblance to Willmoore Kendall, the Yale professor of political science who had a decided influence on a young undergraduate named William F. Buckley, Jr. The resemblance may be accidental, but the parallels are so close—Mosby even writes in green ink, as Kendall did—that I find it hard to believe that they could be accidental. In any case, thinking about what he has so far written about his career—Rhodes Scholarship—unorthodox interpretation of John Locke—Journalist in Spain—wartime service with the OSS (all exactly parallel to Kendall's career)—Mosby decides, having had the reputation of being an amusing,

witty lecturer (which Kendall was), that he must bring some humor into his manuscript, and remembers a thoroughly incompetent, likable Jew he had known after the war in Paris, Hyman Lustgarten—"a Marxist, or former Marxist, from New Jersey. . . . He had been a shoe salesman, and belonged to any number of heretical, fanatical, bolshevistic groups." Now he wanted to be rich, and had come to Europe to get involved in the black market. Lustgarten, who is a born failure, goes from one personal disaster to another, but accepts it all with that peculiarly Jewish form of resignation and humor which Bellow obviously delights in. When we last see him, he has gone into partnership with one of his former black market associates, Klonsky (having married Klonsky's sister), in a laundromat in Algiers. The Lustgarten episode and Mosby's visit to some Zapotec ruins provide the substance of the story, but the purpose of it all is to bring out the rather enigmatic personality and strange career of Professor Mosby—Kendall—and in so doing, to shed some light, perhaps, on academic life as it is in the United States.

A particularly striking short story is "The Old System," a tale of American children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. The parents had settled in an upstate New York city and gotten their start in the secondhand business—furniture, carpets, stoves, beds; the principal character, Isaac Braun, was still a child when he was brought to this country by his parents. "Nevertheless," we are told, "his old-country Jewish dignity was still very firm and strong." He has become quite rich, "starting with rags and bottles as a boy; then fire-salvaged goods; then used cars; then learning the building trades." His sister will have nothing to do with him because she feels that he refused to let her and her two brothers in on a very lucrative, somewhat dubious real estate deal. "He reads the Tehillim aloud in his air-conditioned Caddy when there's a long freight train at the crossing," she says of him. "That crook! He'd pick God's pocket!"

The little synagogue was wiped out. It was as dead as the Dutch painters who would have appreciated its dimness and its shaggy old peddlers. Now there was a *temple* like a World's Fair pavillion. Isaac was president, having beaten out the father of a famous hoodlum, once executioner for the Mob in the Northwest. The worldly rabbi with his trained voice and tailored suits, like a Christian minister except for the play of Jewish cleverness in his face, hinted to the old-fashioned part of the congregation that he had to pour it on for the sake of the young people. Extraordinary times. If you wanted the young women to bless Sabbath candles, you had to start their rabbi at \$20,000, and add a house and a Jaguar.

It is a sad story. There is one particularly telling episode. Isaac wishes to buy a country club to develop into a shopping mall, and agrees to give the chairman of the committee that must make the decision a bribe of \$100,000 in cash. Having delivered the money, and sitting in the parlour of the man who gets it, ". . . furnished in old goy taste and disseminating an old goy odour of tiresome, respectable things, [Isaac] felt lost—lost to his people, his family, lost to God, lost in the void of America." When Bellow wrote those lines, I suspect that, consciously or unconsciously, he had himself in mind.

The paperback edition of the novel *Humboldt's Gift* describes it, in the way of publishers, as "Saul Bellow's crowning achievement." The *New Leader* greeted it as "an instant classic," the *Chicago Sun-Times* was of the opinion that its "ideas reverberate with a classic vision ages old," and Philip Toynbee proclaimed it "the best novel by far of the best living American novelist." Faced by this array of superlatives, one can sympathize with my hesitation to try to come to terms with such a book. The story is told by a Chicago writer, by a writer, I should have said, who lives in Chicago, to whom Bellow has given the name Charles Citrine; it is largely concerned with Citrine's older and much admired

friend Von Humboldt Fleisher, who has been dead for several years at the time we hear his story. The character of Fleisher is derived from the poet and essayist Delmore Schwartz, and I find it difficult not to believe that Bellow has put much of himself into his character Charlie Citrine. Fleisher, like Schwartz, was enormously gifted, had an early, spectacular literary success, but never fully realizes his talents, and eventually destroys himself. In spite of the fact that both Citrine and Fleisher are successful and gain considerable literary recognition—Princeton, for example, is pleased to invite them to spend a year on the campus as “writers in residence”—they obviously regard themselves as outside the mainstream of American life, either because they feel themselves rejected by American society, or they themselves refuse to become a part of it. It is worth mentioning that although *Humboldt's Gift* has Chicago for its setting, the only Chicago characters we meet are a low-level Mafia type and two divorce court lawyers, and the only Chicago settings that are described in any detail are a rather decrepit bath house on Division Street and a divorce court in Daly Center. The latter, however, provides Bellow with the opportunity to give us a wonderfully telling characterization of another Chicago landmark: “. . . and there was the insignificant Picasso sculpture with its struts and its sheet metal, no wings, no victory, only a token, a reminder, only the *idea* of a work of art.”

Bellow's character Charlie Citrine is presented to us as a likable man—witty, a superb conversationalist, and blessed with an alert, inquiring mind and enormous vitality. Still, for all his success as a writer and attractiveness as a person, he has not made a success of his life. He is divorced, he tells someone that he dearly loves his two daughters from his unsuccessful marriage, but he has no relationship with them whatever, and his current mistress, the beautiful Renata, whom he describes in glowing terms, jilts him to marry a funeral director. She was, he tells us, “wonderful to me because she was in the Biblical sense

unclean, had made my life richer with the thrills of deviation and broken laws.” At the end of the book Citrine tries to explain to Humboldt's widow, who loved and appreciated him although at one time he tried to kill her, what Humboldt wanted from life:

All a man of that sort really asks for is a chance to work his heart out at some high work. People like Humboldt—they express a sense of life, they declare the feelings of their times or they discover meanings or find out the truths of nature, using the opportunities their time offers. When these opportunities are great, then there's love and friendship between all who are in the same enterprise. As you can see in Haydn's praise of Mozart. When the opportunities are smaller, there's spite and rage, insanity.

Humboldt's Gift is a good story, artfully put together, and draws the reader along—Bellow is a fine stylist and an accomplished storyteller; it may be an “instant classic,” whatever that may be, but I very much doubt that it ever becomes a classic in the true sense of that word. It is a book of our time, in its use, for example, of the crudest kind of obscenities, but it never rises above the rather meager feelings—to use Bellow's word—or aspirations of our time. Bellow has his character Citrine excuse this, in the case of Humboldt Fleisher, or Delmore Schwartz, with the explanation that the opportunities our time affords are small, but the opportunities of every time are small except to those who have the perception to make use of what lies before them: Solzhenitsyn was able to use the opportunities of the death camps of the Soviet Union, to say nothing of a cancer ward, to create great literature, and as for the need for “the love and friendship between all who are in the same enterprise” Bellow speaks of, there was little of that in Solzhenitsyn's case either, the creative inspiration had to come from himself. There are some wonderfully comic passages in *Humboldt's Gift*, but as the account of the career of an enormously gifted man who

wastes his talent, it is a sad and rather depressing book.

Mr. Sammler's Planet is Bellow's most impressive novel. Like some of his other stories, it consists almost entirely of conversation, reflections, recollections, but the central character, Mr. Sammler, is magnificent and unforgettable. He is a Polish Jew, born in Cracow, well educated, intelligent, much experienced in the ways of the world—he spent the period between the two wars in London as the correspondent of a Polish publication—and survived the holocaust and the subsequent Polish persecution as if by a miracle. What he experienced is difficult to read about, much less to contemplate ever having happened, but he has risen above it and views the world with wonderful detachment and equanimity. He seems to have read everything, but in his old age confines himself largely to Meister Eckhardt, whose work he goes to the public library on Forty-Second Street to read in the original Latin or Medieval German. He, we are made to feel, is truly a wise man, prepared for anything. An instructor at Columbia invites Mr. Sammler to give a lecture to his students on Europe between the wars, a subject which he knows something about. The students interrupt him with obscenities, finally bringing the lecture to a halt. Thinking about all this afterward he remarks (to himself), "The worst of it from the point of view of the young people themselves was that they acted without dignity. They had no view of the nobility of being intellectuals and judges of the social order. What a pity! . . . A human being, valuing himself for the right reasons, has and restores order, authority."

Mr. Sammler, a daughter, and a niece have been brought to New York by his nephew, Dr. Gruner, who is a successful gynecologist, has had Mafia connections, and is quite rich. He is most generous and kind to his Polish relatives and devoted to Mr. Sammler, but finds less satisfaction in his son and daughter, the son very bright and utterly irresponsible and the daughter, beautiful, and in her own way, equally irresponsible. Various people confide in Mr.

Sammler, including Angela, Dr. Gruner's daughter, who insists on describing to him the details of her sordid sexual escapades. Following one of these accounts we come to this significant observation:

Sammler has known Angela's grandparents. They had been Orthodox. This gave a queer edge to his acquaintance with her paganism. Somewhere he doubted the fitness of these Jews for this erotic Roman voodoo primitivism. He questioned whether release from long Jewish mental discipline, hereditary training in lawful control, was obtainable upon individual application.

Reading this, I am reminded of the remark Bellow's character Citrine makes about the beautiful Renata, that she had made his life richer "with the thrills of deviation and broken laws."

Dr. Gruner is not an appealing character: he has no relationship with his children, he has made money by devious means, but Mr. Sammler respects him and prays for him following his death, because he understands his tragedy, and because Dr. Gruner, who hated the practice of medicine and became a physician only because of his mother, was a highly competent one—he did his assigned task well. On his deathbed, Dr. Gruner doesn't wish to see his children, but asks for Mr. Sammler, whom he wants to talk to about some Cracow ancestor. His children represent his American success—his wealth, his Rolls Royce, his elaborate house in Westchester—but Mr. Sammler represents Cracow, the order and authority of tradition: "hereditary training in lawful control." The clash between these two worlds is, for me, the point of this most impressive and profound book.

Now what about Chicago itself? When Hamlin Garland, at the time of the World's Fair, almost ninety years ago, decided to establish himself in Chicago, the city seemed to him, as he said, a "huge, muddy windy market place . . . about to take its place among the literary capitals of the world." It is still a windy market place, but that it has "taken its place among the

literary capitals of the world" seems questionable. We have several universities with excellent libraries and staffed by learned professors busily devising projects which, with the help of foundation grants, they hope to write books about, and doctoral candidates churning out theses, but this sort of activity hardly makes a city a literary capital. More scholarly magazines are published in Chicago than in any other city in the country, but Chicago cannot boast of a single general, literary magazine. The book review sections of the newspapers are of no distinction whatever, and the very inadequately supported public library is stuffed into an old warehouse. As for book publishing, there

was far more going on in the 1890s, in the days of Hamlin Garland, than there is today. During its Chicago period the *Dial* is reputed to have had more subscribers in New York than in Chicago, but it was published in Chicago, and by providing a standard of excellence and a means of communication between writers and readers, doubtless made a significant contribution to what Garland called the "esthetic awakening" of the time. We have no *Dial* now, or anything even approaching it. We must face the fact that we are in a dry period, but we can console ourselves with the thought that all has not been done, that there are still many challenges ahead.