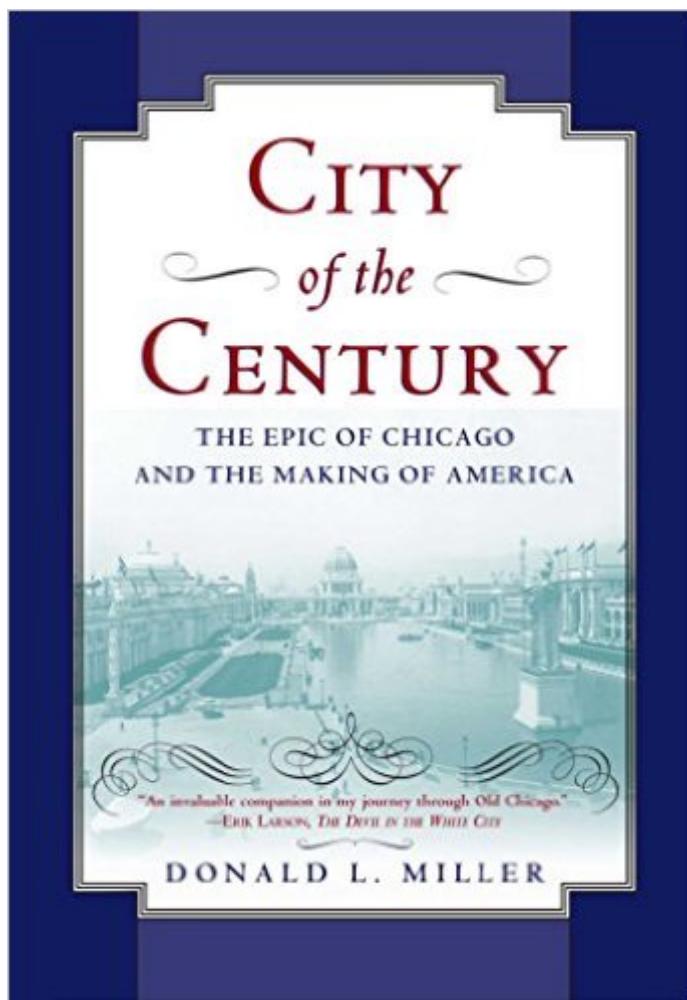


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City Of The Century: The Epic Of Chicago And The Making Of America



Synopsis

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 projectsâ "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.

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Customer Reviews

Donald L. Miller's "City of the Century" is one of the best books of its genre. The book has the sweep of a novel with the detail of an exegesis. Miller's forte is the taking of several historical characters and weaving the truth of their lives into the fabric of the history he would have us read. And in "City", he has excelled at his own methodology. We are introduced to those who settled the "City" and become close to those who not only grew Chicago but soon after it had reached new heights in the 19th century were faced with the destruction by fire of most of what had been built.

And we learn that they were not daunted by this monumental task of re-building the "City". And reading the gripping description of the ruins, we are yet elated by the notion that Chicago is not finished. In less than a decade Chicago rose from the ashes -- to become by the end of the century one of America's greatest cities. Dr. Miller takes us through the whole of Chicago's century of growth, destruction, and rebirth never losing command of the many threads that made the final fabric. And in the telling of Chicago's story we also learn much about the America that contributed its people and its wealth, along with their hopes and dreams to making the "City of the Century". Read this book and you will agree that the only thing lacking is a volume two depicting the continuing evolution of Chicago through the 20th century.

I have had the privilege of having Donald Miller as a professor for three semesters, and when *City of the Century* first came out, I was one of the first to read it. From the opening pages of Joliet and Marquette's exploration of the Mississippi River, the reader is transplanted into the muddy plains that were to become Chicago. Following the next 200+ years, Miller takes you on a fantastic voyage of the successes and failures of one of the most influential cities in American History. The characters and the stories they have are retold by Miller in a style that makes the reader want to learn more. It is the closest that most will ever come to having him as a professor, for his book reminds me very much of his teaching style. A lot of information wound around hours of stories and anecdotes. Miller has the uncanny ability to trick you into learning. You feel as though you are simply sitting at a bar with the man, laughing and discussing whatever topic comes up. But when you finish, you realize that you will walk away with a greater understanding than you ever had before. Donald Miller translates this style into an award winning masterpiece of writing. I would whole heartedly recommend this to all.

I thought this book was one of the more interesting pieces on Chicago history. I am lucky enough to work in the Loop and loved the section of the book about the buildings and to my surprise many of them are still around. I even took a walk to the Rookery and Monadnock buildings to see them for myself and now have a renewed respect for these buildings. I see some readers have complained about the apparent lack of organization throughout the book but that is because it is theme based and not a chronological history of the city like a history book would be but rather he covers topics of the city's past that cover years, decades or even generations. Anyone that considers themselves a Chicagoan will understand and like this book.

This book presents Chicago's nineteenth century history with great clarity. It's the kind of read that stays with you. Chicago's history is surprisingly recent, and the people involved in the growth and flourishing of this city have been shown in Miller's book in a way that brings these people alive. As a lifelong Chicago resident, I feel I know my city much better thanks to this excellent, fast-paced book. I now know where the Chicago Fire burned, where buildings long gone used to stand, etc. It is fascinating for anyone who wants to understand Chicago better. PS -- I wish Miller would do one of the twentieth century Chicago.

Miller succeeds in making a vast sweeping history of nineteenth century Chicago an engrossing and captivating read for even the casual historian, by telling Chicago's story through an intricate web of individual stories. By doing so, he reminds the reader that it is impossible to separate history from the individuals responsible, and that a truly inspired phenomenal development - like nineteenth century Chicago - is no accident. Throughout the book Miller echoes Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis that the West is most emblematic of American ideals, values, and attitudes. At the periphery of Miller's stories about Chicago, one can see the United States itself grow and change. Miller's engaging style makes this history a must read for anyone interested in Chicago and 19th century America, and a wonderful surprise for anyone with a taste for real stories about the human will to succeed.

Donald Miller has written a convincing history of America's Second City in a bracing narrative style. His use of anecdotal information is remarkably tailored to the points he's trying to make and not simply ostentatious. He spins many good yarns about the "rugged capitalists" who came to make their fortunes out of the Illinois swamps and his chapter on Sullivan and the building of Chicago is one of the most beautifully written pieces of architectural history I've read in a while. His grand theme that Chicago is the place where "geography and personality come to interact" is a bit redundant - any city, great or small, could make a similar claim. Miller is more adept at showing us the distinctiveness of Chicago through its relentless accumulative drive and its subsequent desire to become a cultural magnet as a way of cleaning up its act. And he's right, I think, to bring his story to end at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in which these two drives come together. Despite his overstated thesis and his occasional insistence that we keep seeing Chicago as a remarkable experiment instead of letting the facts speak for themselves, this is a first-rate work of history. Indispensable for Mid-Westerners (like me) who want to understand the economic and social growth of their region.

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