

Understand Chicago

CHICAGO TODAY 232

Downtown booms with new skyscrapers and a culinary revolution, but the rest of the city struggles to catch up.

HISTORY 234

Cows, infernos, hog-squealing slaughterhouses, gangsters and corruption comprise the storyline.

ARCHITECTURE 242

Cloud-poking towers are just the beginning of the fabled skyline that spans Prairie, beaux-arts and art-deco styles.

SPORTS 247

Windy Citizens are passionate about their five pro sports teams, filling stadiums throughout seasons.

CHICAGO DINING 250

High gastronomy meets deep-dish comfort food, spiced with Mexican, Polish and Asian fare.

MUSIC & THE ARTS 253

Public art, poetry slams, improv comedy and homegrown electric blues star, all offered in a populist tradition.

Chicago Today

Downtown is thriving, with new skyscrapers, ambitious renovation projects, burgeoning technology industries and a celebrated restaurant scene. Meanwhile, other parts of the city struggle with entrenched matters of poverty, gangs and gun violence. So there are two Chicagos, and the ever-present issue is how to bring the peripheral city on par with the booming core. The mayor has his hands full with this task. Budget woes and recent scandals have made the road rocky.

Best on Film

Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986) A teen truant discovers the joys of the city, from Wrigley Field to the Art Institute. Classic Chicago locations.

The Untouchables (1987) Native son David Mamet wrote the screenplay for this nail-biter about Eliot Ness' takedown of Al Capone.

The Blues Brothers (1980) Second City alums John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd star in the cult classic of two bluesmen on the run.

Best in Print

The Man with the Golden Arm (Nelson Algren; 1949) This tale of a drug-addicted kid on Division St won the 1950 National Book Award.

The Adventures of Augie March (Saul Bellow; 1953) Huck Finn-esque story of a destitute boy growing up in Depression-era Chicago.

The Jungle (Upton Sinclair; 1906) Immigrant life in Chicago's brutal South Side meatpacking plants.

Chicago: A Novel (Brian Doyle; 2016) A young writer chronicles his time in the 'real Chicago' with a colorful cast of characters.

Shiny Downtown

Chicago's core has boomed in recent years. Between 2000 and 2010, the city's downtown added residents faster than any other urban center in America. Developers built stacks of glossy condos that are filled to brimming, and more are on the way – like the 93-story Vista Tower, designed by star local architect Jeanne Gang and set to become the city's third-tallest skyscraper, with \$18-million apartments inside. Add in the many new companies that have moved downtown (ConAgra, Motorola, GE Healthcare, Gogo), jobs at their highest level in almost two decades, and all the downtown civic projects in action (Navy Pier, McCormick Place, the Riverwalk), and you have a shining zone of affluence.

Guns & Gangs

There's a flip side to the city center's prosperity. In outlying neighborhoods, especially on the south and west sides where mostly ethnic poor and working-class Chicagoans live, more than 35,000 properties stand vacant and the population is dwindling. Part of the decrease has to do with the demise of the troubled public housing high-rises, which have all been razed. Many residents are also leaving due to high levels of violent crime.

In 2015, there were nearly 470 homicides in Chicago, and more than 2900 people were shot, mostly in gang-related rivalries. That's more than any other US city. Some blame lax state gun laws. Others link Chicago's crime to its history of entrenched segregation, which has left generations of south- and west-side families stuck in poverty and prime for the lure of gangs. Adding to the problem is mistrust between police and these communities, which came to a boil in the recent case of Laquan McDonald.