



You Were Never in Chicago

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In 1952 the *New Yorker* published a three-part essay by A. J. Liebling in which he dubbed Chicago the “Second City.” From garbage collection to the skyline, nothing escaped Liebling’s withering gaze. Among the outraged responses from Chicago residents was one that Liebling described as the apotheosis of such criticism: a postcard that read, simply, “You were never in Chicago.”

Neil Steinberg has lived in and around Chicago for more than three decades—ever since he left his hometown of Berea, Ohio, to attend Northwestern—yet he remains fascinated by the dynamics captured in Liebling’s anecdote. In *You Were Never in Chicago* Steinberg weaves the story of his own coming-of-age as a young outsider who made his way into the inner circles and upper levels of Chicago journalism with a nuanced portrait of the city that would surprise even lifelong residents.

Steinberg takes readers through Chicago’s vanishing industrial past and explores the city from the quaint skybridge between the towers of the Wrigley Building, to the depths of the vast Deep Tunnel system below the streets. He deftly explains the city’s complex web of political favoritism and carefully profiles the characters he meets along the way, from greats of jazz and journalism to small-business owners just getting by.

Throughout, Steinberg never loses the curiosity and close observation of an outsider, while thoughtfully considering how this perspective has shaped the city, and what it really means to belong. Intimate and layered, *You Were Never in Chicago* will be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of all Chicagoans—be they born in the city or forever transplanted.

You Were Never in Chicago Details

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From Reader Review You Were Never in Chicago for online ebook

Wealththeow says

The tale of a reporter's time in modern Chicago, with nuggets of history about the city's birth and development. I loved the insider look into Chicago politics, but there's a strange amount of time spent defending the author's choices, not least in helping his brother get a job.

Jonathan Hiskes says

A longtime Sun-Times columnist muses on his city, patronage, the multifarious world of manufacturing, fatherhood, the role of a general interest columnist, and the question of who counts as a "real" Chicagoan. Steinberg occasionally got under my skin. He played police brutality for yucks ... he doesn't seem to think journalism needs to be particularly concerned with justice and social change ... but he's attentive, interesting, and an engaging storyteller.

Stephen Rynkiewicz says

Neil Steinberg's taste of Chicago should be familiar to real Chicagoans. After all, reciting the menu is how they prove they're real Chicagoans. But the host so enjoys his choices, you gotta let him order. We all know that most Chicagoans just line up for the pizza.

This book is not a newcomers' guidebook like Jory Graham's "Instant Chicago," a gift from a Sun-Times reporter of another era. But it is just as much of a love letter to the city's landmarks, famous and obscure. (It's a block away, but I was never in the Division Street Russian Baths.) His Sun-Times readers will recognize favorite stories, but transplant Steinberg's own history will be less familiar. Even as he dwells on obit writing and other tradecraft, he claims Chicago bragging rights in a way that will resonate for most anyone who has worked here.

Steinberg and I share suburban writing apprenticeships, and I detect common trade-press experience in his loving descriptions of potato chip and cardboard tube factories. We mostly kept to ourselves for a decade from desks at the future site of Trump Tower, and while his columnist voice can turn prickly or strident this writer is the shy Steinberg I recall, humbled by his luck at making a career and family in such a vital place.

In true "I Will" spirit, the tablet version is a fit companion for packed L cars with no room for page-turners. Yet on the 66 Chicago bus it affords many chances to look up and marvel at the view. Ever illuminating, the e-book also doubles as a flashlight during a ComEd power failure.

Marjie says

I enjoyed this book on so many levels. As a newcomer to Chicago, it was a fascinating glimpse into the city and some of its stories, characters and politics. I'm the daughter of two journalists and worked in newspapers

for 6 years, so Steinberg's career in newspapers resounded with me -- especially since it's an industry that has changed so much. The days of the old white guy smoking cigars in the newsroom and onsite presses are long gone, but I feel affection for the "old days" of newspapers. On that note, this book also evoked a great deal of nostalgia. Steinberg begins with some quotes, from all different time periods, that express a longing for the past. People arriving today (like myself!) wonder about the days before the urban revitalization so many neighborhoods have seen. Those in the '70s longed for the '50s...and so on. I was so excited to read about the Russian Baths, thinking my husband would love it; then was disappointed to learn they had been closed for years. Altogether a great book and another for my "Chicago Shelf".

Tim Lapetino says

Neil Steinberg's "You Were Never In Chicago," is bright, thoughtful and honest, a memoir and history of the city he clearly loves, as I do.

My introduction to Steinberg and his great work as a Sun-Times columnist came in the form of a phone call, when he interviewed me for a story on how the Trump brand was faring after his election. Our talk about the intersection of branding and design was brief, but it turned me on to his work.

He struck me then as his book does now—clever but not pretentious, thoughtful but not overblown, meandering but always with a destination in mind.

Steinberg knits together his story as a Chicago outsider with the city's history—both the headlines and the back rooms, the unnoticed corners and the Grant Park throngs. It's filled with wit and repose and moved me to tears a couple of times. I can honestly say this is one of the best and most authentic books about I've read—it just feels like the city I was born in. It is the first book I'd give to newcomers and the same one I'd recommend to those who, like me, have spent decades here.

It gets my highest recommendation.

Karol says

I'm a sucker for Chicago books in general. This one was a memoir, series of observations, look into the world of the Sun-Times, and glimpse of Chicago life, all in one, so I'd call that a win. More importantly to my history-obsessive inclinations, it offers a good look at the City as it changes throughout the 80s, 90s and 00s, something I always like to read about from more perspectives.

Naomi V says

as a life-long Chicagoan, i fell into the trap described by Steinberg: we ("real" Chicagoans) have very specific rules about who is a "real" Chicagoan, and who isn't. sure, he lived in Chicago for years, but he wasn't born here and he lives in THE SUBURBS now, so i don't really consider him a true Chicagoan. PLUS i object to the spelling he used of the neighborhood he lived in. sorry, Neil; i used to live there, too, and Lakeview is one word, not two. (check the Chamber of Commerce usage.)

Neil writes for the Chicago Sun-Times, which i haven't read in years (sorry, again!) so i wasn't familiar with him, but my husband bought this book for me for our anniversary. he knows how much i love Chicago and that i was interested in learning more about the history.

in any case, i loved the book. i appreciate how Neil wove his own story with Chicago's history; and i learned a few things about Chicago that i didn't know. some of the anecdotes about Chicago figures were pretty funny and insightful about what makes Chicago "Chicago." it's a peculiar place, and we're a peculiar bunch and he did a great job of capturing that.

maybe i'll pick up a Sun-Times on my way home tonight.

Barbara says

I haven't lived in DuPage County since the mid 70s, when I graduated from high school and headed to college in the Northeast where I stayed to make a life. I've rarely been back to see family, who also scattered but returned, at least some of them. But within the last five or so years, most recently this summer, business has brought me back several times to conferences downtown. I began to see Chicago with different eyes. And I've become a big fan. So this book reinforced feelings and memories, and gave me me insights into a city I grew up around, while introducing me to a new writer I want to know more about. This is a love letter to a city that will always be a part of who I am, even that I never lived within its borders. But the history and the politics Neil Steinberg evoked is a part of the dinner conversations and other touchstones of my childhood. For that I am glad to have encountered his Chicago.

Ben says

I guess I was expecting more from this book. I also can't say that I'm a huge fan of Steinberg's style of writing either--his descriptive style often just seemed drawn out to me and left me wishing he'd just get to the point already. The stories included in the book were interesting, but I was hoping for a greater emphasis on the city itself (particularly learning little known tidbits about the city's history) and less on the author's personal life. Having lived in both Evanston and Chicago, I was familiar with most of the locations he was describing, which made the book more enjoyable for me. Without already having that background though, I don't know that I would have enjoyed the book all that much.

Vanessa Wolf says

"You Were Never in Chicago," starts with a barrage of history, but Steinberg's writing evens out and you begin to really feel like you're in Chicago, whether you are or not. To enjoy it however, you need to actually *want* to be in Chicago, to some it has an alluring call, which Steinberg gives voice. I guess I didn't enjoy it because its an ode to a city that I enjoy for the history, but not much beyond the '20s. It is however, a great book about Chicago, I'm just in love with another city.

Maggie Crane says

I didn't love it, but it was entertaining. As a life-long Chicagoan, I did love the history-of-Chicago factoids.

Jay says

Steinberg seems like the kind of guy you wouldn't mind having as a friend. In small doses. Here's a book talking about how Chicagoans think of themselves as Chicagoans, and a big part of that, in this write-up, is tied to doing favors and expected some in return. The end of the book seems to be a long apology and explanation for some things the author did that he must consider a bit ethically incorrect. The thought process that he records is interesting in how he got the state he was in at the end of the book. This felt like somewhat familiar territory - I live in Chicago-land (OK, the suburbs) and know those thoughts, and it was of some interest going through this. Steinberg sets the stage with a lot of personal stories. A lot. It's like that friend that can carry on a scintillating conversation, but prefers to talk about himself - a little goes a long way. It may be better to read Steinberg the way the Sun Times presented him as a columnist, a few paragraphs three times a week. Still, this does say a lot about Steinberg's life, and while I wasn't expecting this to be autobiographical, it held my interest. And you do get a smattering of Chicago, but as the author says, it is impossible to understand Chicago in its entirety - it's just too big.

Kimberly Schlarman says

Steinberg is an excellent writer and--especially as a recent transplant to the city--I really enjoyed his descriptions of Chicago and what it means to be a "Chicagoan." However, I did not realize that this book would be more of a memoir of the author instead of a cultural history of the city. I wouldn't have minded a memoir so much if Steinberg just weren't so unlikable. Maybe it's just his writing style but he comes off as very pompous and arrogant and I found it off-putting and almost didn't finish the book because of his many "humble-brags" ... or just outright brags. He also spends too much time trying to justify using his Chicago connections to get his brother a job with Cook County. He uses that experience to almost justify all the nepotism and cronyism in Chicago. ugh.

There are some lovely passages about the city and about what makes living in Chicago so wonderful. It was interesting to pair this book with "The Third Coast" by Thomas Dyja: Steinberg's book being more of a fluffy love letter to Chicago and Dyja's being a more scholarly cultural history of the city.

Dave Donahoe says

Part history, part memoir, part social examination of the city and its people. A great look into what makes Chicago Chicago. Even if you have grown up and lived here your entire life you will find yourself learning new things, nodding your head "yes, that's how it is," mourning places you will never get to see, and jotting down notes of places within the city that you want to visit before they are gone. This is a love letter to one of the great cities of the world. Thank you, Mr Steinberg. In my opinion, you are a true Chicagoan.

Aaron says

A fantastic read and, in my opinion, never dull. He covers history, the mingling of past and present, clout and corruption, what it means to be a Chicagoan, and a few of our celebrated and vilified public figures. But above all, this book captures exactly how I feel about Chicago - a city of duality - corrupt but pure; beautiful and dingy; the cold, hibernating winters and thriving summers you never want to end. A city where anything is possible.
