



Chicago Shakespeare Theater

## *By the Book*

A tour of Chicago's rich, diverse and historic literary scene

BY KIT BERNARDI

For more than a century, Chicago has influenced writers whose integral works have helped shape America's identity.

Before becoming famous for his 1900 novel, *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser was a newspaper reporter at *The Chicago Globe*. He also had verse published in Chicagoan Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine, still based in the city today.

Canadian-American writer Saul Bellow began his writing career in Chicago during the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers'

Project, a program started under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration. During its four-year run, it supported thousands of writers, editors and researchers, including Bellow, authors Nelson Algren and Richard Wright and renowned Chicago broadcaster Louis "Studs" Terkel.

And *The Chicago Defender*, a historic, social action-focused African-American-owned and operated metropolitan newspaper founded in 1905, published Langston Hughes' column for more than 20 years, as well as poetry by Chicagoan Gwendolyn

Brooks when she was just 17 — long before she became the first African-American author to win a Pulitzer Prize and the first black woman to be a Library of Congress poetry consultant.

Contemporary Chicago writers include Sandra Cisneros, whose Mexican-American coming-of-age novel, *The House on Mango Street*, is included on many schools' required reading lists. South Chicago native and novelist Sara Paretsky is a die-hard Cubs fan like her detective series' female protagonist, the scrappy private investigator V.I. Warshawski. Graphic novelist >



Frederick Douglass: Agitator exhibit



American Writers Museum

system,” says Carey Cranston, museum president.

Compose a poem or short story using the museum’s vintage typewriters, laptops and paper at the *Story of the Day* exhibit, and you might even be featured on the museum’s website. More interactive exhibits delve into writers’ personal lives, trace America’s literary history, explore children’s literature and examine the writing process, including *Frederick Douglass: Agitator*, which ends Dec. 31.

### LET POETRY GUIDE YOUR STEPS

You don’t have to know haiku from iambic pentameter to be well-versed in Chicago’s poetry scene. The Chicago Poetry Tour podcast by **The Poetry Foundation** ([poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org)) is a multimedia tour of poetry written in or about 22 Chicago landmarks and neighborhoods. Downtown podcast sites include the Art Institute, Fine Arts Building, Harold Washington Library, Chess Records, the “EL” train and Chicago Cultural Center.

The Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine since its founding in 1912, is the Midwest’s only poetry library open to the public with exhibits and galleries for readings and lectures. Browse the contemporary, sun-filled space housing 30,000 poetry volumes and 3,000 children’s works by internationally renowned poets. According to Katherine Litwin, library director, rare and novel pieces are available to view upon request and include micro-press poetry books — such as the tiny books featured in the EarBookShelf series and a 1935 edition of *The Dream Keeper* by Langston Hughes with a handwritten inscription to Harriet Monroe. >



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**The Poetry Foundation** collection includes tiny poetry books.

Emil Ferris’ *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*, set in 1960s Chicago, started out as art therapy to help her recover from paralysis. To immerse yourself in Chicago’s literary legacy, check out these locations:

### LISTEN TO FAULKNER AND FROST

At the **American Writers Museum’s** ([americanwritersmuseum.org](http://americanwritersmuseum.org)) permanent exhibition, *Mind of a Writer*, visitors can head to *Featured Works*, which

has touch tables that play 35 recordings of American writers’ pieces, read aloud by many of the actual authors, including William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor and Robert Frost.

In the Wintrust Chicago Gallery exhibit, *Chicago Writers: Visionaries and Troublemakers*, you’ll hear eight readings by Chicago writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Carl Sandburg and Saul Bellow.

“Chicago has always drawn writers who were willing to speak out, be loud and buck the



## ULYSSES

JAMES JOYCE

The Newberry Library collection includes a first edition of *Ulysses*.

### OPEN TO INTERPRETATION

Published in 1623, Shakespeare's *First Folio*, containing 36 plays, is not only one of the most influential books of the English language, but also a venerable stage craft training manual that today's directors and actors use to interpret the Bard's works. (It's also what scholars refer to as the first published collection of Shakespeare's plays.) **Chicago Shakespeare Theater** ([chicagoshakes.com](http://chicagoshakes.com)) is renowned nationwide for its rigorous, text-focused *First Folio* technique training.

Barbara Gaines, the theater's founder and artistic director, says, "If we do our jobs as storytellers onstage, the audience can easily understand every moment of the story without ever having read the play."

She adds that Shakespeare's iambic pentameter scripts are "loaded with clues" telling actors how to reveal characters and propel the story forward. These clues include punctuation, rhyme, rhythm and syntax signaling scene changes.

Chicago Shakespeare Theater on Navy Pier has three performance venues staging this season's productions: *Nell Gwynn*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, Chicago's own Q Brothers' hip-hop version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, *An Inspector Calls* and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, as well as free pre- and postshow audience enrichment programming.

### LITERARY TIME CAPSULE

Established in 1887, the **Newberry Library** ([newberry.org](http://newberry.org)) enjoyed stardom as a world-renowned research institution long before Chicago-based author Audrey Niffenegger's best-seller, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, about a librarian at the Newberry with the ability to drift through time. Open to the public, visitors can time travel, too, through the library's collection spanning six centuries of manuscripts, books, maps, music, periodicals and famous writers' letters, photos and personal belongings. Just sign up for a reader's card to view and

handle these treasured items.

Chicago-centric artifacts include newspaperman Ben Hecht's 1928 Oscar awarded for his original screenplay of silent film *Underworld*, the first-ever gangster movie; correspondence between author Willa Cather and *Chicago Tribune* literary critic Fanny Butcher; and Ernest Hemingway's letter to Sherwood Anderson expressing pleasure with James Joyce's *Ulysses*, published in 1922 and of which the Newberry has a first edition.

First-floor galleries and the new permanent exhibit *From the Stacks*, located near an impressive bookstore, showcase treasures. Free, guided library tours are available Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

### PEN TO PAPER

"Our directors are true to the text, never straying from the playwright's intent," says Michael Halberstam, co-founder and artistic director at the **Writers Theatre** ([writerstheatre.org](http://writerstheatre.org)). This word-wise approach to stagecraft pays homage to the north suburban Glencoe theater's humble beginnings in the backroom of a now-shuttered bookstore.

The company's next residence was the Women's Library Club of Glencoe, until 2016, when it moved to its current spot in a state-of-the-art complex designed by Chicago architect Jeanne Gang. Voiced-over by Writers Theatre actors, free audio tours guide visitors through the building's two intimate theaters and public space.

Productions include classics and burgeoning playwrights' works such as the new play *Vietgone*, opening this season, followed by *Twelfth Night*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Next to Normal*, *Witch* and *A Number*. Pre- and postshow audience-actor discussions are free. ■