

Liesl Olson, *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 373 pp.

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Liesl Olson opens her study with a confession: the impetus for writing a book on Chicago modernism stemmed from her surprise that one did not already exist. Given how convincingly Olson demonstrates Chicago's influence on the development of literary modernism, it is indeed surprising that hers is the first of its kind. To be sure, Chicago at the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has already been the focus of much distinguished scholarship, both historical—most notably William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991) and Thomas Dyja's *The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream* (2013)—as well as literary, including Carl Smith's *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination, 1880-1920* (1984); Carla Cappetti's *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (1993); and Bill Mullen's *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-1946* (1999). As foundational as these studies are, they stay primarily in their methodological corners. Olsen's is unique in that it synthesizes a number of disciplines—literary history, cultural studies, art history, architecture, even sociology—to reveal modernist production in Chicago as “more expansive and varied than in other places” (xvii). *Chicago Renaissance* is thus itself emblematic of the heterogeneous city Olson writes about: “at the center of an unfolding dialogue among writers, critics, institutions, and artists about what it means to be modern” (xvii).

As complex as is Olsen's weaving of literary, historical, and artistic analysis, she articulates her premise clearly: “Chicago was an extremely important site of modernist literary production through the first half of the twentieth century” (xvii). She proceeds, on one front, by detailing how Chicago shaped transatlantic modernism, recalibrating how we read canonical texts such as Pound's “In a Station of the Metro,” which was, it turns out, influenced by *Poetry* editor Harriet Monroe's fascination with Chinese culture as much as it was Pound's (indeed, Olson reveals, Monroe is to thank for the poem's famously modernist spacing and punctuation). By looking to the Midwest, rather than New York or Paris, as a source of modernist production, then, Olson contributes to the ongoing project of expanding and complicating modernist studies while also centering Midwestern literature within US literary history.

Olson is at her best when she elucidates the roles that women and African Americans played in Chicago's modernism. Figures like Harriet Monroe, Margaret Anderson, and Fanny Butcher, Olson writes, exemplify the “behind-the-scenes women . . . who ran the publications, exhibitions, bookstores, and salons where Chicago's art and literature

thrived" (143). By documenting "how Chicago modernism was created through the vision and work of women" (285), she thus validates and makes visible their forgotten labor.

Equally valuable is her discussion of the interconnectedness of black and white literary production in Chicago. Typically treated separately, as estranged from the city's mainstream (white) literary scene, black writers in Olson's work find their rightful place—at the center of Chicago's literary heritage. In addition to devoting a robust chapter to Bronzeville—the city's South Side black neighborhood that "vastly expanded and deepened the city's cultural life across the arts" (13)—Olson integrates throughout the rest of her chapters the many intersections of white and black literary and artistic circles. In this way, *Chicago Renaissance* investigates "Bronzeville's collaborative spirit" in ways that previous studies have left undeveloped or neglected altogether (241).

If Olson illustrates how Chicago bore a significant impression on modernism, she also delineates how the city cultivated its own brand of modernism, free from the strictures of the coastal literary elite. This is the book's most valuable contribution to new modernist scholarship—its claim that while Chicago played a major role in the development of transatlantic literary modernism as we know it, the city's writers and artists did so on their own terms, ultimately producing a modernist aesthetic more "authentic" than their peers' because it shirked both tradition and critics (22). This authenticity could flourish, Olson shows, because it was funded by Chicago industrialists willing to gamble on avant-garde expression in ways that New York titans—who actually had more at stake in backing experimental work—were not. In other words, Chicago simply had less to lose. "Chicago's distance from the coasts could be intellectually liberating," she writes, and its "lack of tradition allowed writers freedom from the eyes of critics and competitors" (41). What followed was a movement certainly influenced by high modernism—as Olson details in her chapter on the Armory Show and Sherwood Anderson, for instance—but that uniquely imagined experimental literature as "[c]lear-eyed prose for a wide readership, with a touch of the journalistic" (21).

Ultimately, Olson contends, Chicago modernists aimed not to *make it new*, per se, but to *make it accessible*. Indeed, the "Chicago brand—or what we might call a 'Chicago style,'" she explains, "is not a coherent aesthetic category but rather the result of a shared desire among writers to reach the common reader" (20). This thread runs throughout Olson's five chapters, uniting her discussions of figures such as Harriet Monroe, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Richard Wright, and Gwendolyn Brooks—who all, in one way or another, courted the average reader. Olson's analysis of how the Midwestern middlebrow reader—exemplified by *Chicago Tribune* literary critic Fanny Butcher—shaped *The Sun Also Rises* (particularly Hemingway's second-person

narration) is especially compelling. Olson's contention that Chicago modernists were moved by ordinary readers, or at least by the attempt to reach a popular audience, further complicates how scholars understand the relationship between modernist art and the marketplace. To be sure, Olson reminds us, "The city could not conceal how its money was made" and its commercial transparency engendered unorthodox audiences and funding structures (12).

*Chicago Renaissance* is an enormous intellectual achievement. Olson curates an impressive amount of archival material, yet everything feels useful, a sentiment that her authors—and their Midwestern pragmatism—would certainly appreciate. Literary scholars, meanwhile, will admire Olson's deft maneuvering between the sweeping cultural history she assembles from her archive, on the one hand, and her illuminating close readings of modernist texts, both written and visual, on the other. In this way, *Chicago Renaissance* serves as a primer for scholars who aim to use archival materials to buttress literary history rather than merely embellish it.

At the same time that Olson advances a rigorously researched project, she innovates the scholarly monograph in ways that open the text to readers outside the academy. For one, her prose is admirably accessible without sacrificing intellectual integrity. Moreover, she alternates the book's analytical chapters with creative, almost Imagistic vignettes. In these short scenes, Olson imagines the inner lives of her writers and reconstructs key moments they experienced in the city. "Darkness filled the windows of the South Side Community Art Center," Olson begins one: "Here, on a chilly Wednesday night in October, dressed in a pressed white blouse and dark wool skirt and talking excitedly with other students, sat Gwendolyn Brooks. She was relieved to be on time. Her husband, Henry, had been home late from the auto repair shop; dinner had been rushed; and they had left their baby son swaddled with a neighbor" (229). Such scenes work alongside the chapters to immerse readers in the daily, even mundane experiences of Chicago modernism, thus humanizing Olson's portraits of these authors.

In Chicago, Olson tells us, "The revolution was to speak straight" (19). *Chicago Renaissance* honors this legacy by making rigorous scholarly production available to a range of audiences, including "mainstream readers, readers in the middle" (xix). It is a vital work—one that will inspire generations of modernist and Midwestern scholarship to come.