

“Of genuine publishers it has none. This failure of Chicago to rise equally in the important work of a city to the level that she attained in so many other ways has had its profound and intricate influence upon the literary talent of Chicago, which was eager for a voice, and which being kept in dumbness has resulted in a cultural loss to the city and its territory. The East could not be expected to take the same interest in the story of Chicago.”

And so lamented Edgar Lee Masters, one of the original “renaissance” authors of early 20th century Chicago, in his memoirs published in 1936. Apparently Mr. Masters never bothered to check the return address on his royalty checks or he would have known someone in the East did take an interest as Masters’ publisher was based in New York. In fact, all of the authors since categorized as “renaissance” writers, Floyd Dell, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, Theodore Dreiser, were published by New York-based publishing houses. A book may be the inspiration and creation of a writer but it is still a publisher who decides whether to risk money in order to bring the book to the marketplace. The Chicago School of Literature, therefore, may be a style of writing and a literary genre developed in Chicago worthy of inclusion in any American literature history book but it was first a business decision made in New York.

Nor was Mr. Masters correct in stating that “of genuine publishers it has none.” During the first three decades of the 20th century Chicago possessed a small (in relation to New York) but thriving community of major national publishing houses including Rand, McNally, P.F. Volland, A.C. McClurg, Reilly and Lee, and Laird and Lee all of whom consistently had books on various national bestseller lists. What the Chicago publishers didn’t do is publish the books of Chicago School of Literature writers. There seems to have been an unexplained schism between the city’s publishers and many of its writers. To be a national literary center, it actually isn’t necessary for a city’s resident publishing houses to sponsor the city’s resident writers. New York’s publishing industry isn’t dependent upon New York’s literary community for economic survival. As long as worthy writers find publishers somewhere and publishers have writers from somewhere else whose books sell in the market, both can prosper and addresses are irrelevant. Yet for a producing center as small as Chicago, such a situation minimizes the potential size of the overall literary community. It is a lost economic opportunity. Ultimately the size of the literary community is a direct function of the money it generates.

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“For a city where, I am credibly informed, you couldn’t throw an egg in 1925 without braining a great poet, Chicago is hard up for writers.”

And so observed A. J. Liebling in a series of articles for the *New Yorker* magazine in January of 1952 that would give rise to the perception of a Second City Syndrome. Of course, there were writers still in Chicago but not in the circles within which Liebling had moved. Liebling worked for a literary magazine of the highbrow type so he pondered the plight of the poet. Poetry simply wasn’t as vogue in Post-War America as it had been earlier in the century; but there still was a small colony of science-fiction writers in Chicago, as well as a similar colony of mystery and crime story writers and a small but influential group of children’s literature authors. What they all had in common was an association with a magazine for their livelihood and it was the magazines that were disappearing not the writers. For someone who was in fact a writer for a magazine, Liebling seemed oblivious to the reality of a changing America and a changing literary marketplace. Rather than asking where Chicago’s writers had gone, he should have been asking where have Chicago’s magazines gone?

Over the course of the 20th century there had been a small but thriving community of publishing companies in Chicago that published periodicals of some national import. In aggregate, it was nowhere comparable in magnitude to the publishing industry of New York; yet it was still the second largest periodical publishing center in the nation. *Women’s World* magazine had at the beginning of the century the largest circulation of any periodical published in America. The weekly faux newspapers published by W.D. Boyce were widely read west of the Appalachian Mountains and east of the Rocky Mountains. Chicago was the media center of the rural heartland because of the Boyce weeklies and magazines such as *World To-Day*. *RedBook* was the equal of Eastern glossy journals of fiction like *Collier’s* or the *Saturday Evening Post* and endowed Chicago with as much of a literary appearance as Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*. The newsstand shelves across America were filled with pulp-fiction magazines of all genres published by giant New York publishing companies, they weren’t known as “fiction factories” without reason; yet throughout the first half of the century, there were always pulp magazines published in Chicago that successfully competed for the

loyalty of pulp-fiction devotees. Some of the most beloved magazines from the Pulp era were Chicago begot: *Weird Tales*, *Oriental Stories*, and *Fantastic Adventures*.

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