

THE SPECTATOR

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You don't need friends
Julie Burchill

The real Viktor Orbán
Tibor Fischer

Tech vs Trump

Niall Ferguson on the great power struggle of our time

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MATTHEW
PARRIS

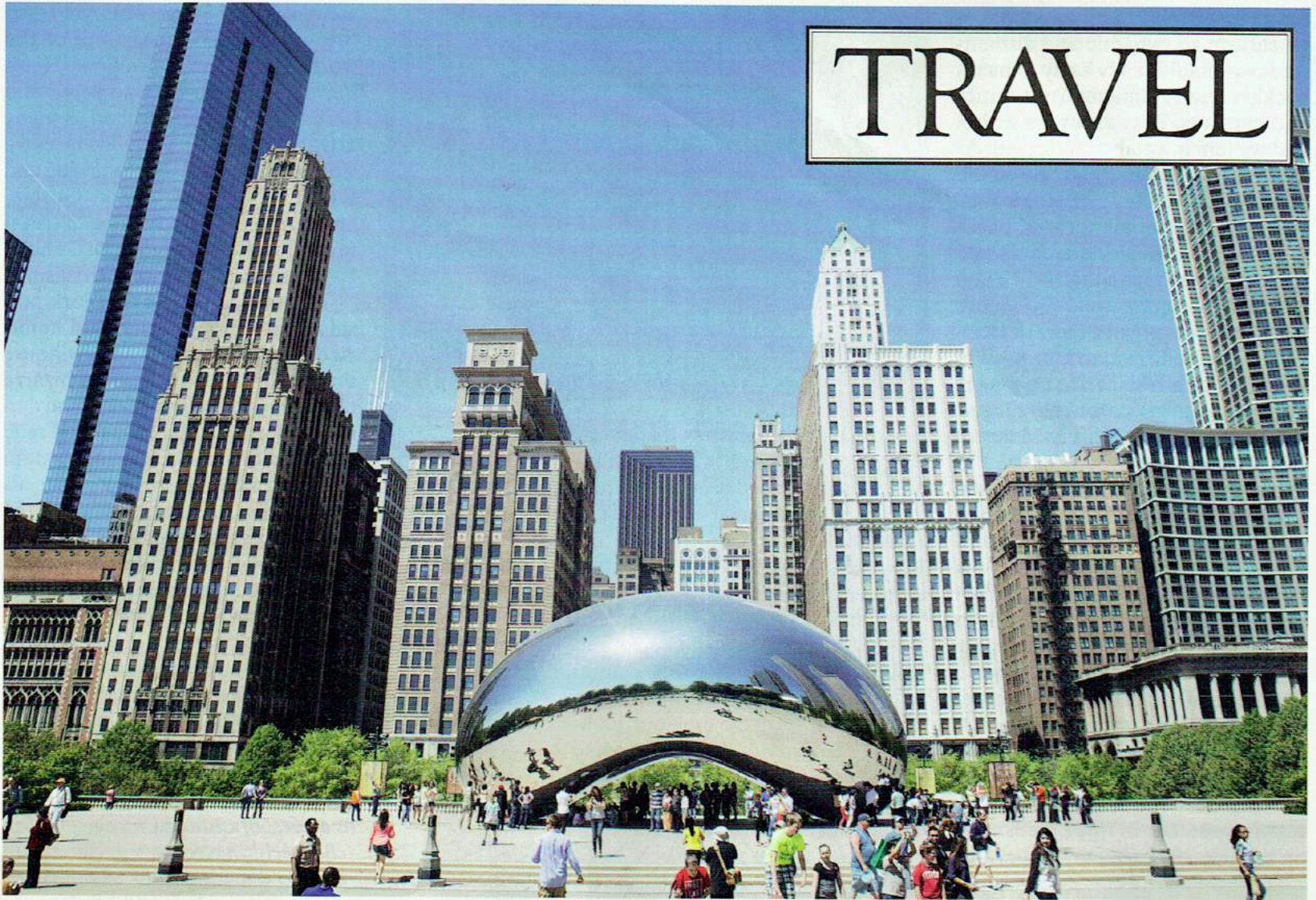


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CHICAGO

Writers' blocks

The Windy City has inspired everyone from Hemingway to Saul Bellow – and now *William Cook*

'Write drunk, edit sober,' Ernest Hemingway reportedly said, and Oak Park, on the leafy outskirts of Chicago, is the place where he became a writer (the drink came later). Here is the clapboard house where he was born, and learned to read and write, and a few blocks away is the home where his father blew his brains out in 1928, just as his son would do 33 years later. Violence is ever present in Chicago, even in affluent Oak Park, but despite its reputation (or maybe, in a way, because of it) this is an intensely literary city, and a fitting location for the new American Writers Museum.

'It used to be a writer's town and it's always been a fighter's town,' wrote Nelson Algren in an essay called 'Chicago: City on the Make'. That was back in 1951. Today, Chi-

cago is a writer's town again. This 'brawling/City of the Big Shoulders' (as Chicagoan poet Carl Sandburg put it) has inspired so many writers, from Saul Bellow to Studs Terkel, David Mamet to Sara Paretsky, and as you wander its windswept boulevards you realise that the world they wrote about is all around you. The man who drove me to Hemingway's house was a retired policeman. He worked on the homicide squad, back in the bad old days when Chicago racked up 1,000 murders a year.

Chicago is safer now – for visitors, at least. The city centre has been spruced up, repopulated by millennials and empty nesters, and gun crime is confined to the poorer neighbourhoods, where tourists rarely venture. Yet gangs, drugs and turf wars are part of daily life, and crime writing is the genre that sums up this muscu-

lar metropolis. Perhaps that's why it's always been such a great newspaper town. Gangsterism and journalism have gone together ever since prohibition, when Al Capone shipped bootleg liquor across Lake Michigan, and Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur set their tabloid drama, *The Front Page*, here.

Chicago used to have dozens of newspapers, now it has just a handful – but the city's journalistic spirit lives on in its energetic fanzines. In record shops and comic shops, you can pick up countless homemade magazines, devoted to every subject you can think of (and quite a few you can't). At a fanzine convention in an old union hall, I met a cartoonist called Mike Freiheit, who moved here a few years ago from New York. There, he had to take day jobs to pay the rent; here, he can afford to devote his time to cartooning.

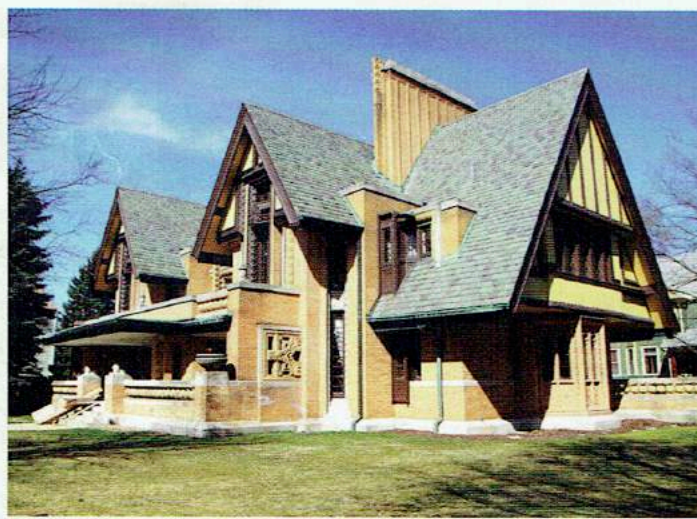
Lower living costs are a big part of what makes this such a creative city. Trendy districts such as Wicker Park are bustling with independent bookshops. Open Books, a second-hand bookstore located in a disused warehouse in the West Loop, runs literacy projects for disadvantaged schoolkids.

Chicago never set out to be a cul-

Chicago never set out to be a cultural capital, and that's what makes its culture so dynamic

tural capital, and that's what makes its culture so dynamic and authentic. It was traditionally a city of meat-packers and toolmakers, not critics and curators. That's why its artists and writers have always thrived. At the Green Mill, an ornate bar in the old Swedish enclave of Andersonville, poets from all sorts of backgrounds (young black rappers, old white hippies) recite their work in a raucous atmosphere that feels more like a speakeasy than a literary society. It's an eclectic mix, and the passion is exhilarating. It's open to all comers — anyone can get up and have a go.

The American Writers Museum is a more sedate arena, located in an art deco office block downtown. I feared I'd find a dreary mausoleum, full of literary bric-a-brac (Mark Twain's inkwell — you know the sort of thing) but thankfully this smart new space isn't full of old curios in glass cases. Rather, it's a rendezvous for readers and writers of all ages: a place to browse and scribble, somewhere to meet up and exchange ideas. When I was there one of several exhibits which transfixed me was Jack Kerouac's first draft of *On The Road*, typed out in three weeks flat on a single 120ft sheet of paper. It's



The Nathan G. Moore House, one of the homes Frank Lloyd Wright built in and around Oak Park

an artefact that captures the joyous energy of American writing, and it was thrilling to see it on temporary display in this new museum.

A short walk away, on Printers Row, is the world's largest public library, named after Harold Washington, Chicago's first black mayor. 'Let us welcome controversial books and controversial authors,' reads a mural on the wall (a quote from JFK). In the winter gardens on the top floor, looking out across the city, I recalled some lines from Longfellow: 'The love of learning, the sequestered nooks/And all the sweet serenity of books.'

This isn't only a literary city; it's

a city of all the arts. The Art Institute of Chicago boasts one of the world's great art collections (Hemingway's mother used to bring him here — no wonder he cited as many artists as writers among his heroes). Edward Hopper's 'Nighthawks' and Grant Wood's 'American Gothic' are here, alongside European treasures: French Impressionism; German Expressionism, Spanish surrealism...

I finished up back in Oak Park, outside Hemingway's childhood home. Around the corner is the first house Frank Lloyd Wright built, a bizarre blend of folksy arts and crafts and daring modernism. His studio is serene and stately, but the grandest room is the playroom he designed for his six children. As I walked back to the station I passed several of the houses he built later, each unique. It reminded me of something Hemingway said: 'For a true writer, each book should be a new beginning.' He claimed there was a book to be written about Oak Park, but never got around to writing it. I wonder what he would have said.

Previous page: Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate in Millennium Park

The author flew to Chicago with United Airlines (united.com) as a guest of Choose Chicago (choosechicago.com).



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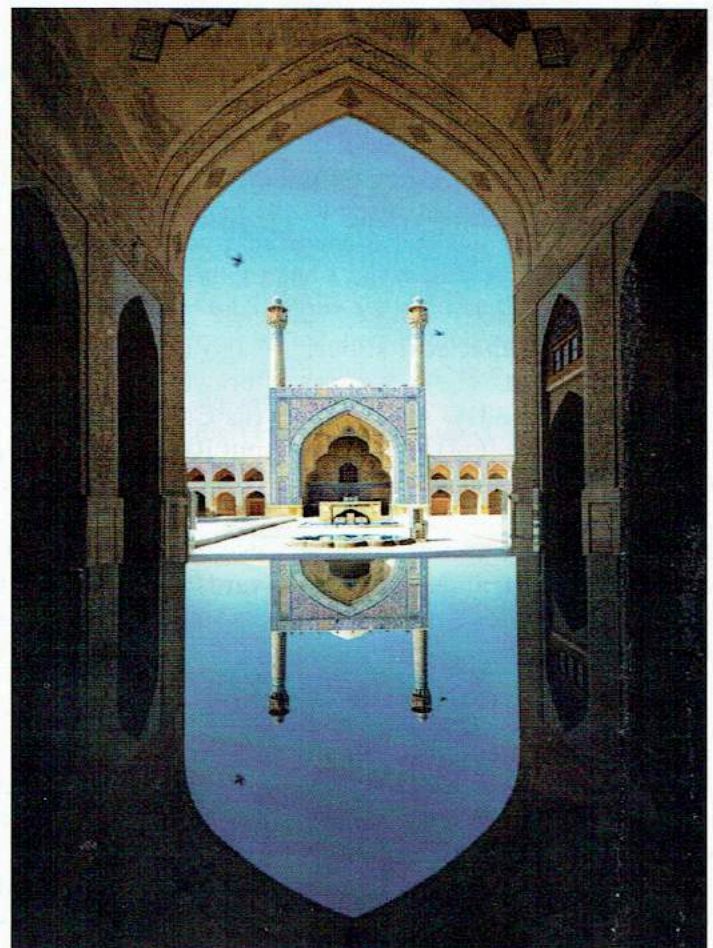
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15 - 26 JANUARY 2018
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