

"In Pursuit of Literary Culture"

William M. Hannay, III

October 7, 2019

The Chicago Literary Club

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A Presentation to
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by
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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, I wish to humbly thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve as the President of the Chicago Literary Club in this, its 146th Season. My presentation tonight is entitled "In Pursuit of Literary Culture." The subtitle for my paper is "A Reconsideration of the Chicago Literary Club's Object and a Verbal Walking Tour of Chicago's Literary Landscape."

(As an aside, I trust that you have noticed that we have introduced a new feature into our Webmaster's weekly email announcements of the upcoming exercises. We now include a subtitle for the papers and a short biography of the presenter. Our hope is that, by giving our members this additional bit of transparency into the topics of the upcoming papers and the backgrounds of the authors, it will motivate more members to attend our weekly dinner meetings as well as helping our members to know a bit more about each other.)

Let me return to my topic: When I began to draft the text of my presentation on literary culture, I was immediately reminded of that famous literary anecdote about the French novelist Honoré de Balzac. This long-struggling writer lived during the first half of the 19th Century. Before achieving success with his masterpiece, *La Comédie humaine*, it is said that the young author – who was then only 24 years old -- had submitted a novel to a publisher called "The Last Fairy" (French title: *La Dernière Fée*). Surprisingly, the publisher actually read the book

and, even more surprisingly, felt so enthusiastic about it that the publisher resolved – right then and there -- to go to the home of the author and purchase the rights for 3,000 francs ... a princely sum in those days. When he looked up Balzac's address and realized that the writer lived in a poor working-class neighborhood in the suburbs, the publisher decided that 2,000 francs would be enough for a man who lived in such conditions. When the publisher went to Balzac's house to close the deal, he found that he had to climb to the sixth floor. He then concluded that an author living in a garret would in fact be satisfied with 1,000 francs. When he finally stepped into the tiny apartment of the poor writer, the publisher blurted out: "Mr. Balzac, here are 300 francs for the rights to your novel." Balzac, who was not aware of the original amount the man had been willing to offer for his novel, accepted without saying a word.¹

Amusing, no? Well, not very. But perhaps you see why this anecdote is pertinent to a speech entitled "In Pursuit of Literary Culture." ... What? No, you don't? ... Frankly, I am not sure that I do either. But it is exactly the sort of anecdote that my English teachers in college used to pepper their lectures with. I guess that, with a bit of a stretch, the anecdote tells us something about the life of the author ... tells us a little bit about the real world he inhabited ... and illustrates one aspect of the interplay between art and economics. In short, such an

¹ Jules Bertaut, Balzac anecdotique : choix d'anecdotes recueillies et précédées d'une introduction (1908), available at <https://uvadahlia.wordpress.com/2015/01/01/10-curious-anecdotes-about-10-of-the-most-famous-writers-of-all-times-by-annarita-tranfici/>

anecdote teaches us something about “literary culture” ... the physical and intellectual culture in which literature exists and the culture in which we exist with literature.

How interesting, you may say ... as you stifle a yawn. What is the point, you ask ... as you struggle to avoid falling into the arms of Morpheus. My point is that, as a Club, we are – or should be – engaged in the pursuit of literary culture. Why is that, you ask? Because Article II of the Club’s By-laws expressly states that “The object of the Club shall be literary culture.” As I see it, one of my duties as President is to lead the Club to better achieve that object.

The object set forth in our By-laws is of course entirely consistent with the Club’s name, that is: The Chicago Literary Club. We are not the Chicago Political Club ... or the Chicago Historical Club ... or the Chicago Arts Club ... or the Chicago Architecture Club. For the past 145 years, we have proudly proclaimed ourselves to be the Chicago Literary Club. Now might be a good time to ask if we really are a Literary Club.

When I was nominated for the presidency, I began doing my homework to learn more about the history of our Club. Because I am a lawyer, I looked at the organizational documents of the corporation, asking, for example, “Is the corporation functioning in a manner consistent with its Articles of Incorporation and its by-laws?” Our Club is an Illinois not-for-profit corporation, so it is only fair to ask whether our Club functions in a manner consistent with the object set forth in its charter and By-laws.

I learned that, when the Literary Club was first formed in 1874, its founding members hotly debated the need and the text of a Constitution for the Club. They ultimately decided against having one, but they did unanimously adopt the following as a preamble for the Club:

“To promote the true sovereignty of letters and culture; to sustain the same by the moral and social virtues; to form and maintain a literary organization fairly representative of the intellectual rank and progress of Chicago; and to cultivate fraternal relations with other exponents of literature and arts.”

The original purposes of The Chicago Literary Club were propounded by Robert Collyer, the first president, at the first annual dinner in 1874. Speaking generally on the topic of “Literature and Great Cities,” Collyer expressed his “anticipation that beside the pleasure and profit each man of us will receive from these gatherings, there will be this solid purpose at the heart of all, to build up in our young city a society of men who will do all they can for the development of literary culture.” Describing the basis for this anticipation, he told the members:

“The Chicago Literary Club was the result of a feeling those who became members of it had in common before they came together, that the time had fully come when all true lovers of books in our city should enter in to a league through which whatever each man had of special worth to his fellows should be brought to the exchange, so that there might be a common wealth of culture which had come to any ripeness, together with a company of men eager and

anxious to welcome every new sign of such culture either among those of their own community or those who might come to us from otherwheres.”²

When the Club was duly incorporated in 1876, the Certificate of Incorporation stated that “The object for which it is formed is social, literary, and aesthetic culture.” Article II of the By-laws repeated that statement.

And there the By-laws rested until 1992 at which time, I am informed, the Board decided to modify Article II by removing the words “social” and “aesthetic,” leaving the phrase “literary culture” as the sole object of the Club. The change, I am told, was proposed by the then-Treasurer of the Club who was concerned that the term “social” (in conjunction with the structure of dues payments and emphasis on dinners) might cause the Internal Revenue Service to reclassify us as a social club and withdraw our hard-won 501(c)(3) exemption.³ (I am afraid that I cannot tell you why the word “aesthetic” was removed from the statement of the Club’s Object, except to suggest that -- while the word “literary” prominently appears among the exempt purposes of 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code -- the word “aesthetic” is not so exalted.)

² Quoted in The Chicago Literary Club, *The First Hundred Years: 1874-1974* (1974), at 19.

³ The exempt purposes set forth in section 501(c)(3) are charitable, religious, educational, scientific, literary, testing for public safety, fostering national or international amateur sports competition, and preventing cruelty to children or animals.

So here we stand – or sit, as the case may be – with the Club’s sole Object being “literary culture.” But, after several years of membership, I have noticed what strikes me as a disparity between what the By-laws state as our Object and what we actually do.

Do we, for example, run a book club? Do we regularly invite well-known novelists, dramatists, or poets to speak to our club? Do we interact with other literary-based organizations in Chicago or elsewhere? Put more broadly, do we encourage “literary culture”? Do we promote “literary culture”? Does anyone in the City of Chicago look to the Chicago Literary Club for guidance on what is happening in the world of arts and letters? Do newspaper or magazine journalists call us for our insight into who are the best young writers in Chicago – or old ones, for that matter?

So far as I can tell, the answer is “no.”

Let me be clear, we definitely do some things that can be called “literary” (but it is not the principal part of what we do). Each year, two or three or four members give presentations that can fairly be called literary. On a half dozen occasions over the years, members have read poems of their own writing or analyzed poems by others. A dozen or more times over the years, members have read excerpts from fiction they have written. And another dozen or more times, members have delivered papers that constitute literary analysis. I have read a number of these papers, and they are impressive.

Also as a regular feature, once every two or three years, we have scheduled a “book night” with short papers in the nature of book reviews. I believe that we even hosted a “poetry slam” a few years ago – though that evening was apparently somewhat disappointing.

So, while we certainly have not ignored literary culture, if you count up the number of papers that relate to literary matters, they total less than 10% of the papers that are delivered. So, truth to tell, literary culture is not the day-in-day-out focus of our programming. But I am bold to say that – based on our Club’s name and our By-laws -- “literary culture” **should** be our principal focus. Or else we should consider changing the Club’s name to something that is not quite so ... dare I say ... misleading? Would it not be more accurate if we simply called ourselves “the Chicago Essay on Anything and Fruit Pie Eating Society”?

As these thoughts percolated through my brain, I began asking around among present and former Club leaders for an explanation of how to reconcile our clearly stated Object and the generally non-literary nature of our exercises. Some had no explanation. Some drew my attention to Section 2 of Article VII of the By-laws which states “Each essayist shall select his or her own subject and be free to express any opinions whatsoever thereon.” (I shall return to this theory shortly.) And finally a couple of people suggested that the Object set forth in the By-laws does not really mean what it literally says. It was suggested that, for as long as the Club has existed, its object has been understood and interpreted in the broadest ... or perhaps loosest ... manner possible. In other words, anything that is written on any topic comes within the rubric of “literary culture” if it is written in a “literate” manner.

That argument reminded me of a famous bit of literary illogic, to wit: the theory of language espoused by Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland", which goes like this:

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't - till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you'!"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

Did the founders of the Club choose for the words "literary culture" to mean that any kind of topic is permissible so long as it is written in competent English? I think not. But to know what the founders had in mind when the Club's Object was inserted in the By-laws, we should look into what the law calls "legislative history." We should go back to see what "literary" activities, if any, the Club engaged in after its founding. So, I looked at the history of the club's First Hundred Years – it was not hard to find ... I just scrolled through Frank Lackner's excellent website for the Club, and found that anniversary volume online.

Beginning with the very early days of the Club, a custom was inaugurated that persisted until the year 1915 and now has been all but forgotten. This was the practice of entertaining distinguished world literary figures at a banquet in the Club rooms. The first of these was held in 1874 to commemorate the eightieth birthday of the poet William Cullen Bryant, in honor of which the club had a dinner. As recounted in the Club's history, "the literary fare was prodigious." Dinner was preceded by a paper on "Thomas DeQuincy" -- think, "Confessions of an English Opium Eater" -- and followed by addresses by two of the poet's brothers, one by the first President of the Club (Robert Collyer), four by members of the Club, and finally by a poem written for the occasion. Apparently the poet himself did not attend. (Perhaps he had seen an advance copy of the agenda.)

In 1880, the Club honored Thomas Hughes with a banquet. Mr. Hughes was the author of *Tom Brown's School Days*, the celebrated depiction of life at the British prep school, Rugby ... a book that had undoubtedly been boyhood reading for most of the Club's then-members. Four years later, in 1884, the Club honored the poet Matthew Arnold with a banquet. (Think of his poem "Dover Beach," which concludes "And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night.") (It was Dr. Arnold that had served as headmaster of Rugby at the time of *Tom Brown's School Days*.) Can you imagine? Matthew Arnold ... one of England's greatest poets of the Victorian Era ... schlepping all the way to Chicago to dine with us? Wouldn't it be amazing to be able to attract an author of similar renown these days?

I joined this Club because I assumed — from its name — that literature was its focus. I cannot prove it, but I believe that many – if not all – new members join because they too assume that literature is our focus. That’s a reasonable assumption and a very reasonable hope.

I love literature and writing, and I wanted to be part of a 140 year-old Chicago organization that purports to be dedicated to “things” literary. I was an English major in college. I studied English in graduate school. I have been a newspaper and a television reporter and am now a lawyer. I am currently the author of nine books on the law and – for fun – I write plays. No one promised me this when I joined, but I thought that I would learn about great Chicago novelists and poets and playwrights of the past ... and be introduced to the works of up-and-coming Chicago writers of the present and future. And not just Chicago writers, but writers from all over America and around the world. ... In short, I thought the Literary Club would be a book club on steroids.

I must confess that I have been disappointed in that expectation. ... I just wonder how many other members have been equally disappointed in this regard. I worry that low attendance at our regular Monday night exercises may be traced to this sense of disappointment. Correspondingly, too many of our members miss the opportunity for experiencing camaraderie and enjoying the papers that our presenters work so hard to write. More broadly, I wish that our Club would play a much larger role in the literary life of our members and our City.

After attending a few of our Monday meetings, it became clear to me that literature was the barest tag end of topics for our Schedule of Exercises. There were biographies of presidents and politicians and architects; there were papers on historical tragedies and controversies. There were papers on esoteric scientific issues and on adventures and explorations. Uniformly these papers were thorough, detailed, and often scholarly, but seldom were there any papers that could be said to be about literature or literary culture. Take a look at our website. The Home page describes our Club as follows:

The Chicago Literary Club is a voluntary association of men and women interested in writing original essays on topics of their own choosing and in listening to other members present their essays. ... Most members are not professional writers, but all are expected to express themselves competently in English

That statement is quite accurate, but it entirely omits any reference to the object of our Club ... it omits "literary culture."

So, what do the two words in the By-laws mean? What is "literary culture"? Or at least what did it mean when the Club's By-laws were written? The founders of the Club seemed to know exactly what those words meant at the time.⁴ A contemporary court opinion, for

⁴ The meaning to the founders of the Club may be gleaned from two roughly contemporary court decisions: An 1877 decision by the New York Court of Appeals, for example, referred to one of the parties in a case about a contested will as follows: "Mrs. Hall was also a person of literary culture, fond of reading and reciting, familiar with the poets; could repeat almost all of Byron and Shakespeare, and conversed very intelligently." Children's Aid Soc. v. Loveridge, 70 N.Y. 387, 401 (1877). Similarly, the U.S. Supreme Court used the term in an 1881 opinion as

example, described one of the litigants as “a person of literary culture, fond of reading and reciting, familiar with the poets; [who] could repeat almost all of Byron and Shakespeare.”

I wish to draw your attention to the essay on “Literary Cultures” published in the Encyclopedia of Chicago. It was written by Prof. Timothy Spears of Middlebury College.⁵ It directly addresses the concept of “literary culture” as it existed in the late 19th Century in Chicago.

Prof. Spears points out that the Chicago Literary Club as well as The Contributors Club, the Little Room, the Cliff-Dwellers' Club, and the Society of Midland Authors “strove in various ways to establish literature as a respectable civic art” in the years following the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Their mission was “to establish oases of learning and culture in Chicago's raw social climate” and paralleled the establishment of the city's other great cultural institutions such as the Art Institute, the Chicago Symphony, the Chicago Historical Society, and the Newberry Library. Chicago's literary societies offered writers, intellectuals, and artists a much-needed sense of community, and a vision of what an urban culture of letters could be.” But as Prof. Spears’ essay makes clear, “literary culture” was not a unitary phenomenon in Chicago.

follows: “No man of literary culture, it is true, would call a book paper or a manufacture of paper, any more than he would designate a masterpiece of Raphael as canvas or a manufacture of canvas.” Pott v. Arthur, 104 U.S. 735, 736 (1881). Coincidentally, a Pennsylvania Supreme Court case from 1892 dealt with “a club called the Ellsworth Club, which was duly chartered, [and which] was organized for the purpose of literary culture and improvement and as a social club.” Commonwealth v. Tierney, 148 Pa. 552 (1892).

⁵ Available at <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/755.html>.

The “gritty realism” that characterized the work of Theodore Dreiser at the turn of the century, Richard Wright in the 1930s and ‘40s, and Saul Bellow and Studs Terkel in the 1950s and ‘60s -- which critics have dubbed the “Chicago School of Literature” -- found its earliest expression not in literary societies, but in nineteenth-century newspapers. And Chicago’s ethnic communities – concentrated in neighborhoods such as Pilsen – generated their own literary cultures ... in the Polish, Norwegian, Yiddish and other languages.

Fascinated by Prof. Spears’ essay, I reached out to him at Middlebury College and asked him what thoughts he might have about the Chicago Literary Club’s object as stated in its By-laws. His reply to me was instructive.⁶ He wrote me as follows:

My first suggestion is to pull out the term “culture” from the phrase “literary culture” and think of it in anthropological terms as a system of beliefs, values, and practices that change over time. [T]his relativistic approach may be useful to you since the meaning of “literary culture” changed dramatically during the late 19th century, and this transformation was particularly significant in Chicago, given the city’s rapid growth after the fire. At mid-century, literary culture was more oriented around elite society and writings that catered to limited audiences. By the turn of the century, that situation had changed radically.

Writers from different backgrounds, classes, and locales began to define Chicago literature (think of Hamlin Garland or Theodore Dreiser), expanding the meaning

⁶ Correspondence from Prof. Timothy Spears to William M. Hannay, Sept. 27, 2019, on file with the author.

of literary culture. In general, the move was to a more democratic ethos, but all this was complicated by an expanded marketplace for writers, ethnic/class differences, and all that made this nation modern. * * * The exciting thing about Chicago literary history is that we get all this change in a concentrated dose. Your club seems to have been founded at the outset of these transformations, and it wasn't until the 1890s that Chicago's promise as a literary culture really came into focus.

If you run a Google search for the term "literary culture" to see how it is currently used, you will find scores of books and articles with the phrase "literary culture" in the title. You will find books or articles entitled "Are Tiny Books a Sign of the Twee-ification of Literary Culture," "Literary Cultures in History," "Hierarchies of Literary Culture," "T.S. Eliot and the Demise of the Literary Culture," "The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece," "Politics, Literary Culture & Theatrical Media in London: 1625-1725," "Elizabethan Publishing and the Makings of Literary Culture," "Literary Culture in Taiwan," "Countermodernism and Francophone Literary Culture," "Literary Culture and U.S Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II," "The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture," "Literary Culture under Justinian," "Literary Culture and the Victorians," "Adoption of Chinese literary culture," "Egyptian Literary Culture and Egyptian Modernity," and dozens more.

One article that I found most interesting and thought-provoking is "Bring on the Books for Everyone: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture," by Notre Dame English professor

Jim Collins.⁷ (It is excerpted from his 2010 book of the same name.) He describes a moment of epiphany in which he describes being “overwhelmed by the absurdity ... of my presuming to teach my students anything about contemporary literature without taking superstores, blockbuster film adaptations, and television book clubs into account, not just as symptoms of the current state of the culture industry but as the sites, delivery systems, and forms of connoisseurship that formed the fabric of a popular literary culture.”

Prof. Collins’ comments are especially apt for this Club to the extent that we rededicate ourselves to “literary culture” as the object of the Club’s activities. I take Prof. Spears’ point: Whatever our founding great-grandfathers thought of as “literary culture” in 1874 is not the same as the “literary culture” of 21st Century America. I don’t mean at all to suggest that we abandon the great literature of the 19th Century and before ... we must continue to know it and enjoy it ... but we must embrace contemporary literature in all its forms and (to use Prof. Collins’ phrase) in all of its “delivery systems.”

At this point, let me return to an issue that I alluded to earlier. In explaining why most papers presented to the Club do not concern novels or plays or poetry -- the kind of things that are usually thought of as literature -- some of our Club’s leaders drew my attention to Section 2 of Article VII of the By-laws which states “Each essayist shall select his or her own subject and be free to express any opinions whatsoever thereon.” To be an answer to my concern about a disconnect with our Object, the argument here must necessarily be that Article VII of the By-

⁷ Available at <https://www.popmatters.com/130507-bring-on-the-books-for-everyone-how-literary-culture-became-popular--2496143602.html?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1>.

laws “trumps” Article II of the By-laws. (I use the term “trump” in the Contract Bridge sense and not in any political sense.)

But in my view, that argument only goes so far. It “proves too much.” If every member can choose a subject that has nothing to do with “literary culture,” that laissez-faire logic would totally nullify the Object of the Club. There would be nothing left of Article II. Therefore, a more harmonious analysis of the By-laws would interpret Section 2 of Article VII to grant each essayist the right to select his or her own subject so long as that subject can reasonably be said to fall within the broad meaning of the words “literary culture.” Put differently or more simply, the essayist should respect or give consideration to the Club’s Object in selecting his or her subject.

What then are subjects that fall outside the Club’s proper Object of “literary culture”? Well, I don’t really know, and, in any event, I don’t want to go there. I am not prepared ... probably not qualified ... to opine on what is not literary culture ... and certainly I don’t want to gore anybody’s past or present ox and say that some subject is or was a “no no.” (By the way, I use the word “gore” in the matadorial sense and not in any political sense.)

So let’s go the other way around and ask what subjects are within the ambit of literary culture. From my perspective, I would like us to move towards a more Chicago-oriented, outward-looking subject matter for the papers, and less about personal experience and anecdote. There are endless literary touchstones surrounding us in Chicago, and I would like us to find ways of emulating or bringing these events and institutions into our Club, not simply appreciating them individually and *in situ*, so to speak.

We have iconic theater in and around Chicago, for example. It is national in stature but homegrown to a tee. Think of the birthplace of improvisational comedy: our own Second City, which trained a host of remarkable performers and helped spawn the remarkable phenomenon of *Saturday Night Live*. Think of Steppenwolf (which started in a church basement in Highland Park and is now the home of wonderful, big name actors in their ensemble). Think of the Goodman (which began under the wing of the Art Institute and whose current home turned around a rundown section of the Loop). Think of the Writers' Theater in Glencoe, which has become a nationally recognized launch pad for aspiring playwrights. All of these companies have sent shows to New York City to rave reviews. They are an integral part of Chicago's literary culture. Let's encourage our members to study what these theaters – and the hundred other storefront and pop-up theaters in our town – have done and are doing in Chicago. Let's bring this vibrant life of drama and comedy into our Club! Let's talk about it ... let's share it with each other. We could even go to a play one night and schedule a separate night to talk about that experience, maybe even get a member of the cast or production team to be our guest.

But if theater is not your cup of tea, how about writing a paper on the life and works of one of Chicago's literary lions? A novelist or newspaper writer, perhaps? Joseph Kirkland, for example. Between 1875 and 1893, Mr. Kirkland read 15 papers at meetings of the Chicago Literary Club. He was one of the original members of the Club and served as the literary editor of the Chicago Tribune. He was author of two realistic novels of pioneer life in the Far West, including *Zury: The Meanest Man in Spring County* (1887).

Or maybe do a retrospective on Theodore Dreiser. Does anybody still read him? If not, why not?

Or somebody could tell us about Ben Hecht, a great Chicago newspaper columnist, who moved to New York City and then Hollywood, striking it rich with hilarious plays like “Front Page” which lampoons the early days of newspaper reporting in Chicago.

Or walk us in the footsteps of authors who lived life on the streets. Maybe have us tag along – conceptually -- through drink or drug-filled nights with novelist Nelson Algren. Stop by the Rainbo Club at 1150 N. Damen Ave. It is located in the Ukrainian Village neighborhood which was once quite poor, blue collar and predominantly Polish. It opened in the 1930s and once featured burlesque dancers. Chicago-based novelist Nelson Algren used to hang out in the Rainbo, occasionally in the company of French writer Simone de Beauvoir with whom he reportedly had a torrid affair when she visited Chicago. Nicknamed by Chicago locals as "Simone da Beaver," Mlle. de Beauvoir was the lifelong companion of Jean Paul Sartre. The Rainbo Club is said to have inspired Algren's fictional tavern, the "Tug & Maul," in his book *Man with the Golden Arm* that was later adapted into a movie starring Frank Sinatra.

Or finish up one night at the California Clipper at 1002 N. California Ave. Do it as research for a paper about either Saul Bellow or Studs Terkel. The Clipper is located in Humboldt Park, the old stomping grounds of both of them. It's lost its seedy atmosphere since its recent acquisition by an upscale restaurant chain called Hogsalt (which also runs the handsomely refitted 3 Arts Club café at Dearborn and Goethe), but the Clipper continues to serve classic 1940s cocktails and trendy new ones like a Purple Martín. There used to be a

monthly literary evening hosted by the Guild Literary Complex featuring prose readings for a prize, but that seems to have stopped since the new owners came in.

If you don't want to do the research for your next Literary Club paper by going on a pub crawl, try visiting Chicago's newly-created **American Writers Museum**, located on the second floor of 180 N. Michigan Avenue. It opened in May 2017 and features exhibits and programs highlighting writers from across genres, time, and the country. It is an ultra-modern museum, not a library. Instead of manuscripts and first editions, it features interactive touch screens and high-tech multimedia installations. For example, one room is given over to a shimmering "Word Waterfall," in which a wall of seemingly random words is constantly changing and resolving themselves into literary quotations.

The Museum has both a permanent collection (which is limited to dead writers) as well as temporary displays, such as the famous 120-foot scroll on which Jack Kerouac typed out his novel, "On the Road." (It was on loan for six months.) Whether the use of the continuous scroll was necessary or even useful to Kerouac's creative process is debatable, but it is a great piece of marketing that helped cement the writer's wacky radical image.

A newspaper article about the Museum quotes a member of the museum's Board as saying that "American literary culture is uniquely democratic and sort of bubbles up from below."⁸ (P.S. - It's good to see that "literary culture" is still an active term in America.)

⁸ New York Time, May 8. 2017.

And if you still haven't found a subject for your next Literary Club essay, let me remind you of some cultural institutions that might give you leads to follow.

First, let's talk about the **Guild Literary Complex**. This organization is a 501c3 nonprofit that tries to bring together the varied voices of writers from Chicago and the world through integrative programming that highlights the intersections of marginality, the power of community, the impact of arts and activism, with a mission of social justice and literary arts for all. It is, in effect, an on-going curated literary festival serving Chicago's 50 wards since 1989. (Check it out at <https://guildcomplex.org>.) Among its activities, the Guild Literary Complex hosts the Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Awards which is an annual poetry competition founded by the Pulitzer Prize-winning, former Poet Laureate of Illinois, Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000).

2019 is the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Guild Literary Complex. To celebrate, the Guild has selected 30 new writers from among those identified by its extended community as the individuals whose careers represent the future of the literary arts in Chicago and beyond, and whose work reflects the spirit and values of the Guild today. These 30 writers are profiled on the Guild's website at <https://guildcomplex.org/30-writers-to-watch/>. Why don't you read a book or two from some of these writers and come in and tell us about them?

If you are interested in more literary figures to write about, let's talk about the **Chicago Literary Hall of Fame** (<https://chicagoliteraryhof.org/>). Occasionally in the past, they have offered tours of areas of literary historic importance, including Nelson Algren and Wicker Park; the Pilsen area; Oak Park; Chicago's Gold Coast; Chicago's Black Literary Renaissance; and the Chicago Journalists tour. But the Hall of Fame is better known for giving the "Fuller Award for

Lifetime Achievement.” It is awarded to a Chicago author who has made an outstanding lifetime contribution to literature.

The award was inspired by the literary contributions of Henry Blake Fuller, one of Chicago’s earliest novelists. Coincidentally, his best-known book is probably The Cliff-Dwellers, the first American realist novel to use the rapidly developing city of Chicago as its setting. (P.S. – It’s not about the club in which we normally meet.) Fuller’s depiction of social climbing and human depravity among the “cliff-dwelling” residents and workers in the then-new Chicago skyscrapers shocked readers of the time, and influenced many American writers that followed. It remains a compelling document of Chicago’s social history and gives an unforgettable picture of modern American life at the close of the nineteenth century. That sounds like a good one for somebody to come and tell us about.

Because the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame only inducts historical writers into its Hall of Fame, the Fuller Award – begun in 2012 -- was created as a way to acknowledge *living* Chicago writers. The first seven Fuller Awards were made to Gene Wolfe (2012), Harry Mark Petrakis (2014), Haki Madhubuti (2015), Rosellen Brown (2016), Angela Jackson (2018), Stuart Dybek (2018), and Sara Paretsky (2019). (How many of you have read anything by the first six of these writers? Full disclosure: I haven’t, and I have only heard of Sara Paretsky because I’m a mystery novel junkie.) But wouldn’t it be interesting to learn more about those six authors ... six whose books are good enough to be recognized with a Fuller Award.

But wait, wait. We’ve only touched on plays and novels. We can’t forget poetry. The most amazing starting place for information about all things poetic is Chicago’s very own Poetry

Foundation. Established in 2003 with a major gift from philanthropist Ruth Lilly, the Poetry Foundation evolved from the Modern Poetry Association, which was founded in 1941 to support the publication of *Poetry* magazine. Headquartered in a purpose-built facility on West Superior Street, the building includes a 30,000-volume poetry library and a performance space for the Foundation's many public events. (For listings of poetry events, go onto the Poetry Foundation's website, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/events>.) Incidentally, you will have the opportunity to hear more about the Poetry Foundation at the Chicago Literary Club's own Poetry Night on Monday, December 2nd. I am happy to report that we are reinstituting our Poetry Night after a hiatus of several years. Our featured speaker that night will be Club member John W. Barr, who served as the President of the Poetry Foundation from 2004 to 2013. John was the Arthur Baer Fellow in 2006 and introduced us to the Foundation in 2008. He will provide a status report on the activities of the Foundation over the past five years.

And if you want an unusual poetry experience to report back to us about, go down to the Green Mill cocktail lounge at 4800 N. Broadway. It continues to host the longest running "poetry slam" in the country. Have you ever been to a poetry slam? I went the other night and found it fascinating. It's done as a competition, in which would-be poets perform their poetic creations before a live audience. A panel of judges is picked from the audience. (Slams were started as a reaction to poetry as an elitist and rigid art form. While formats can vary, slams are often loud and lively, with audience participation, cheering and dramatic delivery.) One poet, named Tyehimba Jess -- who twice competed as a member of Chicago's Green Mill team in the National Poetry Slam -- went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2017.

To bring our brief tour of Chicago literary culture back full circle, let's return to my hoped-for idea of a "book club on steroids." I am delighted to report that our Club's Committee on Arrangements and Exercises under the chairmanship of Peter Conroy has re-instituted a "Book Night," at which three members will report on books they consider to be of merit. On Monday, March 23, 2020, Heidi Rothenberg will report on "The Greatest Knight" by Thomas Asbridge; Philip Liebson will report on "Grant" by Ron Chernow; and Elsie Holzwarth will report on "Return of the Native" by Thomas Hardy.

I am equally happy to report that our "Book Night" will ecumenically be matched up – so to speak -- with a "Theater Night" on Monday, April 20th. On our "Theater Night," Beverly Ann Conroy, Elaine Loeser, and Francis Lackner will analyze recent theater productions of note.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? The Club has a great history of well-written papers on a wide range of topics, some of which did indeed deal with literary culture. But I maintain that we should focus more intensely on topics of literary culture going forward. Not only will this honor the purpose for which the Club was founded, but it will – I hope -- reinvigorate interest in attendance at the Club's exercises from the many members who dutifully pay their dues but rarely come to our dinners. They will come (I believe) if we bolster what brought this Club together 146 years ago: that is, in the words of the Club's original preamble, a shared interest in "form[ing] and maintain[ing] a **literary** organization fairly representative of the intellectual rank and progress of Chicago." We are making a great start by scheduling book, theater, and poetry

nights, but I also urge members to voluntarily choose **literary** topics for their papers during the remainder of this year and in the years to come.

I look forward to strengthening the Club's sense of community and personally knowing more of you during the coming year ... and I look forward to having meaningful discussions about literary culture in Chicago. When we adjourn tonight, it is probably too late to head off to one of Chicago's dive bars ... and hunt for the ghosts of Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, and Studs Terkel. But it is good to know that sharing a few drinks can be a legitimate part of our literary culture. Let's go lift one together in the near future!

Thanks and Good Reading!

W.M.H.