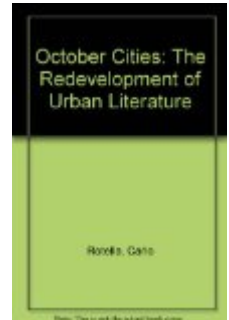


**Carlo Rotella.** *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature.* London and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998. xii + 358 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-20763-9.



**Reviewed by** William J. Savage

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In *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature*, Carlo Rotella, Assistant Professor of English and American Studies at Lafayette College, has made an important contribution to our ongoing discussion of postwar representations of the American city; especially regarding narratives of urban decline, community formation, and the racial politics of American culture's discourse on the second ghetto. Rotella has made exemplary use of a wide variety of sources, from canonical and noncanonical literature to journalism and the publications of governmental bodies and private urban developers, in order to examine "the relationship of urban literature to the cities it draws upon for inspiration (p. 3)." In each of three parts, Rotella focuses on one city and the writers associated with it: Chicago, with Nelson Algren, Mike Royko, Gwendolyn Brooks and Stuart Dybek; Philadelphia, with South Street writers Jack Dunphy, William Gardner Smith, David Bradley, Pete Dexter, and Diane McKinney-Whetstone; New York, with Warren Miller and Claude Brown. The structure of the book is very effective: just as each section builds over several chapters to make its point, so the book itself builds to a culmination as

we progress from the Chicago to Philadelphia to New York, from laments over the decline of the urban industrial ethnic village to attempts to maintain or create community in the redeveloping city to the problems of representing the second ghetto. Rotella does us all a service when he reminds us that "the redevelopment of material and textual cities is the result of choices made by individuals, groups, and institutions: how to invest money and effort, what to build and what to publish, how to live and what to write, social policy and word choice. There is a literature of city life, and a history of it, in the shifting overlap of urban orders shaped by those choices (p. 324)." This book will reward the interest of any student or scholar of urban policy, postwar American fiction, realism, or African-American literature.

In the first part of the study, Rotella analyzes Nelson Algren's National Book Award winning novel of 1949, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, and his prose poem *Chicago: City on the Make* in order to examine the decline narrative that comes with the change from the industrial city with its system of ethnic neighborhood villages to postin-

dustrial city characterized by suburban sprawl and the death of the ghetto of opportunity. Algren was the last practitioner of the Chicago school of realism as practiced by Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright; Rotella demonstrates a compelling parallel between the declining urban neighborhood Algren portrays and the decline in status of his chosen literary bailiwick. Just as the old neighborhood order went by the boards, so too did Algren's sort of fiction, although I would attribute Algren's decanonization more to the ideological pressures of Cold War politics than to the idea that "influential critics seemed to regard the problems of industrial urbanism as no longer a fit subject for serious literature (p. 59)." It was not so much the problems of the city that critics considered sub-literary; it was specifically any consideration of the city which had a Leftist political angle. Saul Bellow's 1953 novel *Adventures of Augie March*, for instance, was widely praised by the same critics who dismissed Algren even though it was largely set in the same neighborhoods Algren considered; but Bellow's emphasis on the individual overcoming circumstances fit with the ideological formula of America triumphant. (In the interest of journalistic full disclosure, let me state here that I wrote my dissertation on Algren in relation to exactly this topic.) Rotella continues beyond Algren to consider how other writers (Royko, Brooks and, perhaps most importantly, Dybek) make textual neighborhoods in journalism, poetry and short stories out of the very postindustrial order which Algren could neither understand nor represent in fiction.

His second part moves on to Philadelphia, in particular the South Street neighborhood and deals with "the relation of neighborhoods' local orders to the metropolitan orders headquartered in Center City's office towers and City Hall (pp. 119-120)." He treats five novels set on South Street over a period of four decades as "one composite text" due to the fact that "the various pieces of the story encompass a larger landscape and a larger set of narratives including slavery, black migra-

tion, and ghettoization on the one hand, and European immigration, Americanization, and the decline of the urban village on the other, but these landscapes and narratives flow together in the South Street literature to form a story of postindustrial transformation told on the scale of family and neighborhood (p. 121)." This strategy works well, as the parallels between the various texts, along with differences inflected by the writer's historical moment, ethnic and racial identity, and relation to intellectual culture, enable Rotella to illuminate the interconnectedness of issues usually (and mistakenly) kept apart.

Finally, Rotella grapples with New York, specifically Harlem, and the issue of how urban intellectuals get their credentials for representing the city of fact in their textual cities of feeling. Can any urban intellectual, like Miller, author of *Cool World* and *The Siege of Harlem*, be considered a reliable source on ghetto life regardless of race, or did it take an African-American from the ghetto, like Brown with his *Manchild in the Promised Land*, to represent it? This section of the book is perhaps most interesting in relation to current debates about identity politics and is a powerful counterforce to the intellectual ghettoization of African-American literary studies. By analyzing issues of identity politics and race in the context of arguments about both the state of the ghetto (especially regarding crime) and the process by which writers stake out their metaphorical intellectual turf, Rotella integrates issues which are at the fore in African-American studies into the ongoing debate of urbanists. Any work which gets intellectuals talking across counterproductive disciplinary boundaries is valuable; any work which does so with the intelligence and force of this argument is invaluable.

Throughout the study, Rotella provides subtle, nuanced and extremely well-thought-out analysis of both literary texts and the personal and political contexts in which urban intellectuals work. His prose is graceful, vigorous and laced with

good humor (as when, he refers to the late Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago as "the First," a not-so-sly reference to the dynastic nature of "Democratic" politics in Chicago). The book stands as an all-too-rare reminder that academic prose can (and should) be well-written and a pleasure to read.

While it is probably unfair to criticize an author for not doing what he said he wouldn't do, I believe that this excellent work would have been even better had Rotella chosen to include Los Angeles in his survey. His decision to keep his focus on Chicago, Philadelphia and New York is amply justified by the richness of his material and the depth and subtlety of his analysis. But, as Rotella states in an endnote, "many of the postwar period's most important urban narratives have special meaning for Los Angeles (p. 326)", and these narratives would have provided a compelling counterpoint to the "narratives of decline" and urban crisis so common to the older industrial cities of the Midwest and Northeast. Writers from Raymond Chandler to Walter Mosely have represented the class and racial conflicts which accompanied the development of Los Angeles in ways which seem natural for this study. I think, in particular, of Marlowe's comment about the home of Taggart Wilde, the district attorney in *The Big Sleep*: it "was one of those solid old-fashioned houses which it used to be the thing to move bodily to new locations as the city grew westward. Wilde came of an old Los Angeles family and had probably been born in the house when it was on West Adams or Figueroa or St. James Park (p. 105)." Such an image of the movement of capital, political power, and status across the landscape of the city offers a rich vein to be mined. Yet this critique actually speaks to the high quality of *October Cities*, as my line of thought here fulfills Rotella's "hope" that "the analyses that follow.... suggest additional texts and cities to the reader and that the reader extends my arguments to them (p. 14)."

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