

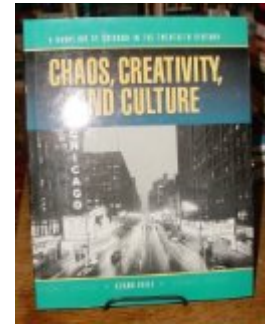
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Kenan Heise.** *Chaos, Creativity, and Culture: A Sampling of Chicago in the Twentieth Century.* Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith, 1998. 192 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87905-054-2.

Reviewed by Tracy Poe (Program in the History of American Civilization, Harvard University)

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“Chaos, what is it?” Kenan Heise asks in the brief introduction to *Chaos, Creativity, and Culture: A Sampling of Chicago in the Twentieth Century* (p. 11). Unfortunately, the most obvious answer might be, “this book.” What begins as a unique attempt to present the “stormy, husky, brawling” culture of Chicago in the twentieth century (to quote Carl Sandburg’s famous poem) turns out to be a vaguely conceived “who’s who” of literary, artistic, architectural, political, and polka figures devoid of context or analysis.

One gets the sense that the book is random by design. Heise and his publisher have arranged the pages in several different font styles and sizes. Graphics, photographs, sidebars and extracted quotes are used in abundance, the post-modern visual style suggesting the chaotic growth of urban culture. The chapters are loosely arranged by decade, with sub-headings on various art forms within each period, beginning with L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* in a segment on literature in the 1900s and ending with a painting of Wrigley Field by Arlene Marks in the 1990s’ section on contemporary art. Frequently, however, subjects appear out of chronological order: in the 1940s’ chapter, several paragraphs are dedicated to Maria Callas’ 1954 performance with Chicago’s Lyric Opera, while a section on theater in the 1950s includes a discussion of the 1970 musical *Grease* (which was actually produced in New York and took place, nominally, at a fictional Chicago high school). Neither are the subject headings consistent. Each chapter does include a section on literature, but only a few mention politics. Some of the omissions are notable: in the 1940s’ chapter, for example, World War II is barely mentioned, and no Chicago politicians are profiled. Several mayors are treated in various chapters, but no union

or Civil Rights leaders.

It is easy, however, to find fault with what is “left out” of these kinds of books. Clearly, Heise had a lot of material to choose from. The problem isn’t so much what he included and what he didn’t as it is the lack of context for his choices. Most of the text consists of excerpts from primary sources about famous people who lived in or visited Chicago: a two-page quote from Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* here (pp. 78-80), Adlai Stevenson’s acceptance speech at the 1952 Democratic National Convention there (pp. 99-100), Nelson Algren’s critique of *Playboy* magazine elsewhere (pp. 119-20). Each excerpt is introduced with a fifty- to one-hundred-and-fifty-word biographical sketch, but there is little or no analysis of the way in which it is exemplary of the chaos, creativity, and culture alluded to in the book’s title and introduction. In fact, there is very little of Heise’s own prose linking these subjects to one another at all, beyond somewhat vague and grandiose statements such as “Between 1900 and 1910 Chicago produced three direction-changing books in American letters” (p. 13). Changing what direction? Heise doesn’t say.

Furthermore, Heise leaves it up to his readers to make the connection between diverse individuals within each chapter like gangster Al Capone, jazz musician Louis Armstrong, opera singer Mary Garden, and University of Chicago President Robert Maynard Hutchins. While there no doubt is a socio-cultural context in which these historical characters bear some meaningful relationship to one another, it seems enough for Heise that they all lived in Chicago during the 1920s. He rarely explains what links one person to those listed before and after, as if each lived in a social vacuum. In his Acknowledg-

ments, Heise mentions that a friend urged him to “quash” his own writing and “Let Chicago be Chicago” (p. 10). It is a piece of advice the author perhaps took a little too literally.

The book is well-produced on fine paper, and is full of gorgeous black and white photographs and reproductions of original book jackets, art works, and architectural drawings. The lovely pages of poetry set with lots of blank space on a serene gray background are an especially nice touch. (I particularly liked the pages on Gwendolyn Brooks, with the big photograph of her smiling in

front of a bookcase). The overall effect is of a coffee-table book geared towards an intellectual crowd. And indeed, that might be the best use for this book. It is full of interesting factoids and pretty pictures. It would be a nice thing to leaf through while waiting for the Thai-food delivery guy. It has too much text to be a coffee-table book, though, and too little substance to be a work of history. As a source of amusing anecdotes for the Chicago history buff, it is an enjoyable, if incoherent, trifle. But as a contribution to serious literature on Chicago culture in the twentieth century or to urban history generally, it can't be recommended.

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