



Written Wind on the Wind

Once considered the country's literary capital,
Chicago has produced and attracted
some of the century's best writers.
Today, two of the hottest-selling books
by local authors are a cookbook
and a collection of satirical fables—
a suggestion of how the publishing world has changed

by Paul Engleman

It has been more than 100 years since Henry Blake Fuller broke ranks with the genteel writers of his day and wrote *The Cliff-Dwellers*, a novel viewed as marking the beginning of Chicago literature. Fuller's account of the power brokers who controlled the city from shimmering new skyscrapers is the first gritty novel about Chicago and one of the first important novels about urban American life. The book's title was adopted by an arts and literary club founded in 1907, which still exists as a social club that is fighting to remain in its original Orchestra Hall location.

Fuller, a native Chicagoan who spent time in Europe, portrayed his hometown as "the only great city in the world to which all its citizens have come for the one, common avowed object of making money." Seven years later, in 1900, Theodore Dreiser offered an even darker view in *Sister Carrie*, a novel that chronicles the life of a naïve young woman from Wisconsin who comes to Chicago filled with hope but finds herself caught up in higher social and economic forces.

Dreiser, a literary pioneer of the naturalistic view that individuals had little control over their own destinies, came to be regarded as one of America's most important novelists. With *Sister Carrie*, he opened the doors of the Chicago school of realism, a literary style characterized by an uncompromising, unromanticized view of urban life. He also laid the groundwork for the city to become "the literary capital of the United States," a title bestowed in 1920 by Henry L. Mencken, then the nation's most esteemed, if hyperbolic, arbiter of culture.

Writing flourished in Chicago during the first three decades of this century. Harriet Monroe founded *Poetry* magazine, Margaret Anderson started the *Little Review*, and Jane Addams's Hull House made a significant contribution to the fledgling little-theatre movement. The city had eight daily newspapers, some of which published fiction. The novelist Floyd Dell helped mold the *Chicago Evening Post's* Friday *Literary Review* into one of the country's outstanding book supplements.

Many writers came to visit; many stayed. Some were born and bred here; others were born here and fled. Some were giants of American literature, their names recognizable even to those who, like me, went through high school with the avowed object of learning only what was required: Dreiser, Monroe, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Finley Peter Dunne, James T. Farrell, Edna Ferber, Ben Hecht, Robert Herrick, Ring Lardner, Jr., Vachel Lindsay, Charles MacArthur, Edgar Lee Masters, Frank Norris, Will Payne, Carl Sandburg, Upton Sinclair, Booth Tarkington.

In the compressed lens of historical hindsight, it is convenient to view these writers as having a collective voice, though their work was more a clamor than a chorus. Norris and Sinclair, who did not live here, were novelists with social agendas; Ferber and Lardner were very much humorists; Hecht and MacArthur were journalists who became playwrights; Lindsay and Sandburg were poets. But they all wrote about Chicago at a time when there was great curiosity about the city and when people formed

their images of a place in large part from fiction. They also constituted a noteworthy literary society in an era when literary society was considered something worth noting.

Today, three-quarters of a century later, there is still a vibrant, if diverse, literary community in Chicago. *Poetry* magazine is still published here; *TriQuarterly*, the highly respected literary journal published at Northwestern University, has been going for more than three decades; and half a dozen other journals have sprouted up in the past few years. A Chicago Public Library listing of 207 fiction writers who have had an association with the city through its history includes more than 50 writers actively working in the Chicago area today.

Some, such as Carol Anshaw, Stuart Dybek, Reginald Gibbons, Larry Heinemann, and Lisel Mueller, have won prestigious literary awards. Others, such as Eugene "Guy" Izzi, Sara Paretsky, and especially Scott Turow, have achieved widespread popular and critical acclaim.

Nonetheless, many contemporary Chicago writers remain largely unknown, or at least unknown for having a connection to the city. While poets have long been accustomed to anonymity, Chicago novelists are just as often invisible. Nelson Algren, who won the first National Book Award in 1950, and Saul Bellow, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, remain monolithic among Chicago novelists, even though Algren died in 1981 and Bellow moved to Boston two years ago.

Whether today's Chicago writers have squandered their literary inheritance or are simply spending it in less discernible ways is not easily determined. As literature in general has taken on a more internal quality, strong regional voices have been muted over time. One thing that seems certain is that changes in commercial publishing have made it far more difficult for good writers to reach a wide audience. If there were another Dreiser in our midst, the odds are increasingly bleak that many people would know about him.

In 1926, the fickle Mencken withdrew his blessing of six years earlier by publishing an essay by Samuel Putnam, a former Chicagoan who had joined the herds of writers thundering to New York. In "Chicago: An Obituary," Putnam declared that the city's literary scene had been drained of life due to the departure of Anderson, Dreiser, Lardner, Masters, and others for points east.

The pronouncement was a bit premature. Four years later, Chicagoan Margaret Ayer Barnes won a Pulitzer Prize for *Years of Grace*, a multigenerational novel of manners set in Chicago. Although Barnes did not achieve lasting stature, she did write two more best-selling novels in the thirties. James T. Farrell, Chicago's most prolific writer—who would publish some 50 novels, story collections, and essays before his death in 1976—was just getting started with the first of his three Studs Lonigan novels. And Nelson Algren's first novel, *Somebody in Boots*, would not be published until 1935.

The stampede of
writers in and
out of Chicago
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Nonetheless, Putnam was correct in predicting Chicago's decline as a literary center. Looking back, it appears that the stampede of writers in and out of Chicago during its literary heyday was the longest parade in the city's history, a parade that lasted nearly 40 years. It was as if they all felt the need to be here for the illustrious World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, but they all had the sense to leave town before 1933's Century of Progress, a far less successful event.

A list of the important Chicago writers who have emerged since the Depression could fit on a voting stub: Algren, Bellow, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Meyer Levin, Richard Wright. Boosterish Democrats with a penchant for multiple voting might add a few names (perhaps Cyrus Colter, Arthur Meeker, Willard Motley, Harry Mark Petrakis, or Mary Jane Ward). But the list is short, and it almost always ends with Algren and Bellow.

Sharon Fiffer, a writer and former editor for the journal *Other Voices*, speaks for many members of the Chicago literary community in observing, "When the subject of good Chicago writers comes up, I find it really tiresome that people always trot out Algren and Bellow." But she is unable to name a successor with any certitude. Likewise, *Tribune* book critic John Blades, himself a novelist, insists, "Anyone who says there are no good writers in Chicago is crazy. There must be a hundred writers here of some prominence." But if Blades could read one Chicago writer for his own pleasure, who would it be? "Algren."

Comparing the current literary landscape with that of 80 years ago is inherently inequitable. Chicago writers of the past were very much beneficiaries of circumstance: They were presented with a distinct, bustling, fast-growing metropolis to tell the rest of the world about. Books were an essential source of information and entertainment. With the rise of new media—first radio, then movies, then TV, cable TV, and now on-line technologies—the literary terrain has been bulldozed, malled, subdivided, and franchised like the land itself. Current writers everywhere are confronted by a homogeneity of geography, which may explain why none of the editors, writers, or booksellers we surveyed could readily identify any city or region of the country as having a recognizable voice.

Early Chicago writers provided a window through which the rest of the world viewed the city. Upton Sinclair took readers through the stockyards; Frank Norris took them to the Board of Trade; Carl Sandburg offered them an identity—hog butcher for the world. Today, fewer people form their images of a place from fiction or poetry. Die-hard readers may insist that the printed word offers more lush and powerful imagery, but for immediacy you can't beat the visuals presented in film or on TV. How many people would have read Sinclair's classic novel *The Jungle* if Bill Kurtis had been on hand to provide a video tour of the stockyards?

"Fiction today no longer serves the same purpose that it once did," says Nicholas Weir-Williams, a professor at Northwestern and director of the university's press. Carolyn Koo, a nationally

noted young poet and publisher of *No Roses Review*, concurs. "The function of literary voice has changed. It still provides a window into someone else's experience, but in a more intimate way."

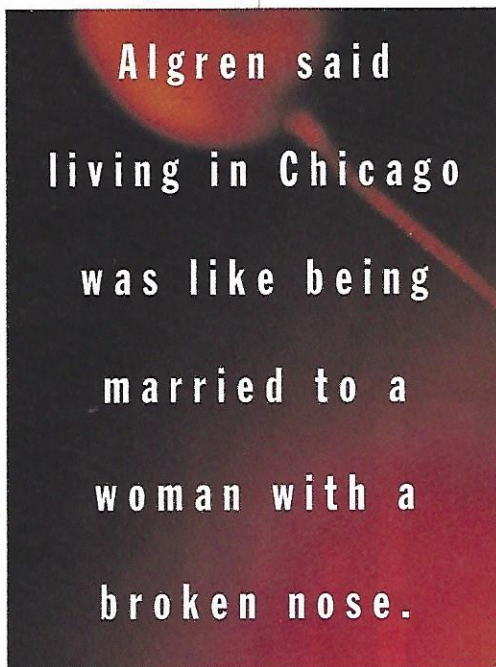
Both Algren and Bellow lived in Chicago, felt unappreciated, earned critical praise, and sold books. The similarities end there. Algren was *of* Chicago, Bellow *in* it. Algren, with his gritty characters and street settings, has obvious roots in realism. He did his best work in the forties, with the novels *Never Come Morning* and *The Man with the Golden Arm* and a story collection, *The Neon Wilderness*; he also updated and revised Sandburg's vision of

Chicago in the compelling 1951 prose poem *Chicago: City on the Make*. Bellow's more sophisticated fiction emphasized internal over external forces and is sometimes absurdly comic, as in *Henderson the Rain King*, published in 1959. *Dangling Man*, his first novel, was published in 1944, and *Humboldt's Gift*, the novel that earned him the Pulitzer Prize, in 1975.

No Chicago writer is arrogant enough to declare himself the next guy in the Algren line, though a few, I'm sure, like to think it. Or, they at least like to think they know the guy. In a canvass of writers and editors this past spring, several people said they knew the guy. But it was never the same guy. I suggest we move the debate along by naming Guy Izzi acting Algren successor. With 11 crime novels in the past eight years, he's the most prolific fiction writer in Chicago today. Like Algren, Izzi has prowled the streets, one of few Chicago storytellers willing to do so without a camera crew for backup.

Finding a successor to Bellow requires prowling the halls of the city's colleges and universities, to some a scarier thought. One name that comes up is Richard Stern, a former colleague of Bellow's at the University of Chicago, who has published eight novels, five nonfiction books, and several short stories. But last year, with the publication of the sprawling, multigenerational novel *Divine Days*, Leon Forrest, a Northwestern professor of African-American studies and English, emerged as the consensus heir apparent—if only for having had the audacity to write an 1,138-page novel. But mention Forrest's name more than six blocks from a campus, and someone will probably think you're talking about the guy who owns Leon's Bar-B-Q. Which underscores an important point: In addition to a Nobel Prize, Bellow has something vital that Stern and Forrest lack—a significant audience. Bellow, like Algren, has sold millions of books. "These days," says Lee Webster, head of Another Chicago Press, which originally published *Divine Days*, "to sell 3,000 copies of a literary novel is a great success."

One gifted Chicago writer who has been able to find a place on the bestseller lists is Scott Turow. Purists may chafe at comparisons of Turow with Algren or Bellow, but his novels have elements of realism and internal reflection, showing the influences of both. No matter how much critical or popular acclaim he attracts, however, it is unlikely that Turow will be thought of as a Chicago writer. With the fictitious Kindle County as a setting, his novels do not resonate with a (*continued on page 88*)



Top Shelf



Although Chicago's literary scene is scattered and quiet, hundreds of writers live and work in the city, crafting novels, short stories, and poems. It would be impossible to mention them all. Instead, we've compiled a short list of emerging artists mentioned repeatedly by local editors, writers, and publishers because of the outstanding quality of their work. Many are new at their craft; others have been around for some time. Most don't have highly recognizable names—though that may change. But together, they provide a window to some of the best writing being produced in Chicago.

Carol Anshaw, 49, earned critical acclaim for her 1992 second novel, *Aquamarine*, a wry look at the different ways early choices reverberate throughout a life. Born in Detroit, she moved to Chicago in 1968. She is a book reviewer for the *Village Voice* and is completing her third novel, *Seven Moves*.

Anne Calcagno, who grew up in Rome and lived in New York for three years, calls Chicago an artist's city. An assistant professor of creative writing at DePaul University, the 37-year-old has been lauded for her unorthodox style and strong female characters in *Pray for Yourself*, her 1993 collection of short stories.

She is writing her first novel, *Struck by Dina*, set in Eritrea and Saudi Arabia.

Charles Dickinson, 44, makes his living as a copy editor at the *Chicago Tribune* and in his free time writes award-winning novels (*Waltz in Marathon*, *Crows*, *The Widows' Adventures*) replete with witty, offbeat characters. His short story "Colonel Roebing's Friend" is set to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and he is finishing *20 Years Running*, his new novel "about sex and its consequences."

Leon Forrest is hardly a newcomer—indeed, he's the only author on this list with a day in his honor: April 14, 1985,

was Leon Forrest Day in Chicago. But with his fourth novel, 1992's epic *Divine Days*—the powerful tale of a bartender and would-be playwright on the South Side in 1966—his profile has risen dramatically. Professor of African-American studies and English at Northwestern University, Forrest, 58, is working on a book of six novellas.

Reginald Gibbons, *TriQuarterly* editor, Northwestern University professor, and esteemed poet, recently discovered that even established writers run into roadblocks trying to publish a first novel. He says he almost gave up on *Sweetbitter*—a story of interracial love in

(continued from page 85) sense of place. And his portrayal of the city takes a back seat to his major achievement: elevating the crime novel and creating a whole new genre, the legal novel. Although ambulance-chasing publishers, not Turow, are responsible for the glut of bad legal novels that followed *Presumed Innocent*, only time will tell whether he will be the one held in contempt.

Several other Chicago-area writers have produced noteworthy novels or story collections in recent years—among them Carol Anshaw (*Aquamarine*), Charles Dickinson (*Waltz in Marathon*), Stuart Dybek (*Coast of Chicago*), Larry Heinemann (*Paco's Story*), David Michael Kaplan (*Skating in the Dark*), and James McManus (*Chin Music*). Playwright David Mamet has also earned acclaim for a powerful, straight-ahead style that evokes the Chicago realists, but he fled the city almost as soon as he got a driver's license, returning only for periodic, extended stays.

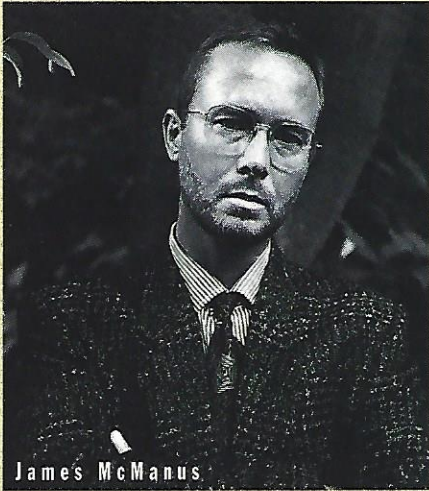
Algren said living in Chicago was like being married to a woman with a broken nose. Being a short-story writer or poet must be like trying to breathe through one. Dozens of Chicago writers and poets publish in prestigious literary journals, but few of them will be quitting their day jobs. In terms of financial rewards, poetry and story writing constitute the publishing industry's ghetto. But poetry also is literature's most democratic precinct: Anyone with a pencil and some thoughts to share can

take a stab at it; most give it up before drawing blood.

With Gwendolyn Brooks, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for *Annie Allen*, occupying the Illinois poet laureate's chair for 25 years, it might seem that serious poetry has been motionless in Chicago. But observers of the local literary scene say the form is thriving today—from such self-taught practitioners as Luis Rodriguez, Mark Smith, and Tony Fitzpatrick to scholarly poets such as Sterling Plumpp, Angela Jackson, Susan Hahn, David Wojahn, and Michael Anania, to name only a few.

For better or worse, Chicago is the center for the revival of performance poetry—live readings that often have a theatrical dimension. When better, performance poetry offers the mad social commentary of Lisa Busceni; when worse, it's akin to monster truckin' without the trucks. A few serious poets express hope that the performance movement will spur more people to read print poetry, an optimism that may in itself disqualify them from being regarded seriously. Others find hope in a fuzzy light recently spotted at the end of the tunnel through which they see the world: Maya Angelou's reading a poem at Bill Clinton's inauguration.

But there is always room for gloom in this arena, and several Chicago poets point to the departure of Paul Hoover and Maxine Chernoff, who recently moved their journal *New American Writing* to San Francisco, as a significant literary loss for the city. It's a move that few outside the literary circle will notice.



James McManus

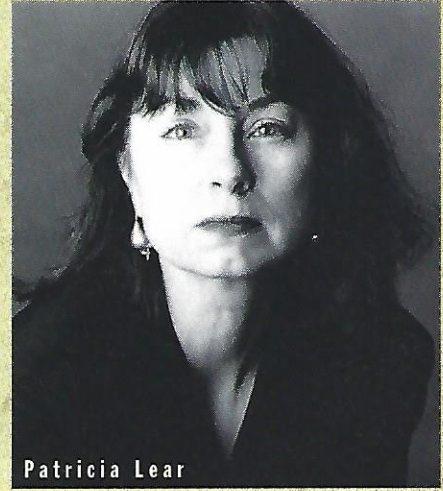
early 1900s Texas—before a small Seattle house agreed to publish it. Gibbons, 48, just completed his fifth book of poems, *Sparrow*, and is concentrating on a second novel and a collection of “strange, very short stories.”

A graduate of Chicago’s Organization of Black American Culture Writers Workshop, **Angela Jackson**, 43, is admired for her rhythmical language and her poetry’s complex metaphors. Born in Mississippi, she moved to Chicago as a child. She has published five volumes of poems, including *Dark Legs and Silk Kisses: The Beatitudes of the Spinners*, and is currently writing *Treemont Stone*, a novel.

Patricia Lear of Evanston put her writing career on hold while she raised two children, then dazzled critics in 1992 with her first short-story collection, *Stardust, 7-Eleven, Route 57, A & W and So Forth*. Winner of an O. Henry Award for her story “Powwow,” Lear, 50, an occasional contributor to *Chicago*, is working on a new collection of stories and her first novel.

Li-Young Lee is the author of two highly acclaimed poetry collections: *Rose* and *The City in Which I Love You*. He recently published his first work of prose, *The Winged Seed*, a haunting glimpse into his childhood. Born in Jakarta in 1957, the great-grandson of the Republic of China’s first elected president, Lee fled Indonesia with his family in 1961, arriving in the United States three years later. He came to Chicago in 1981.

James McManus, 44, who teaches writing and literature at the School of the Art Institute, is known for his avant-garde fiction, especially his 1985 novel *Chin Music*, which centers on the outbreak of World War III, just as the White Sox make the World Series. McManus recently finished his fourth novel, *Going to the Sun*, which will be published by HarperCollins next January.



Patricia Lear

A nationally respected poet and the founder and director of Tia Chucha Press in Chicago, **Luis Rodriguez**, 41, details his involvement with drugs and gangs in *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* Unapologetically raw in its depiction of his early years (before coming to Chicago in 1985), *Always Running* was published in 1993 almost as an open letter of warning by Rodriguez to his son, Ramiro, who was then involved in a local gang. Curbstone Press will publish Rodriguez’s latest work, a children’s story called *America Is Her Name*, next spring.

(Compiled by Paul Engleman and Vikki Lipset)

Harriet Monroe’s observation of 80 years ago still stands: “The modern English speaking world says ‘Shut up!’ to its poets.”

Journalism has been an essential and enduring element of Chicago’s literary legacy, partly because prominent early writers such as Finley Peter Dunne, Edna Ferber, and Ring Lardner, Jr., worked for newspapers. A major boost to the notoriety of Chicago journalism was provided by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, two crime reporters who left Chicago for New York in the twenties and became successful playwrights. In their classic play *The Front Page*, written in 1928, Hecht and MacArthur romanticized the Chicago newsroom and the wisecracking characters who populated it.

But it was Louis Terkel, nicknamed Studs after the character in James T. Farrell novels, who became Chicago’s most recognizable literary landmark without writing a word of fiction. With the publication of *Division Street: America* in 1967, the first in his series of notable oral histories, Terkel served as a bridge between Chicago’s storytelling and journalism traditions, acting not only as a voice of the city but the ear and mouthpiece through which the voices of ordinary Chicagoans were heard throughout the world. Fortunately for the city’s image, they didn’t all sound like Richard J. Daley.

If someone succeeds Terkel, now 83, in putting Chicago back on the literary map, it may well be a journalist. But anyone who

is aware of the city’s decline from an eight-paper town during Ring Lardner’s day to a two-paper town during Mike Royko’s knows that Chicago has yet to produce another Royko, and Royko hasn’t produced like the real Royko since the real Daley died.

Journalism, like fiction, is withering in the heat of instant electronic media. Alex Kotlowitz earned praise (and enough attention to prompt a TV movie) for his vivid account of housing-project life in *There Are No Children Here*, but the TV news footage from 219 North Keystone Avenue was more immediate.

The facile explanation for literature’s decline in popularity is that people don’t read much anymore. The glut of bookstores on Michigan Avenue and the revised architecture of the book business indicate otherwise. In 1967, the first year the Census Bureau began compiling data on book sales, Americans purchased 657 million books. By last year, sales had increased to 9.4 billion. According to the American Booksellers Association, popular fiction (which includes romance, male adventures, fantasy, and the occult) accounts for more than half of all books sold in the country. Literature (classics as well as contemporary) and poetry are charted as subcategories of a grouping that includes art, architecture, and performing arts, and the overall category accounts for just 3.9 percent of all books sold. Sales in the “psychology/recovery” category make (continued on page 118)

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up 5.9 percent, and the subcategory of diet, health, and grooming is 2.4 percent. Is it any wonder that the most successful recent fiction book by a Chicago author is James Finn Garner's one-note, 79-page parody called *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*? Or that the most successful book by a Chicagoan in recent years is *In the Kitchen with Rosie*, written by Rosie Daley, Oprah Winfrey's cook?

In Chicago, as everywhere else, literary pursuit gives chase to an ever-shrinking audience, while the book business itself plays to a packed house. If there were another Dreiser or Sandburg here, there's a good chance he'd be lost in the crowd.

"Small publishing houses are the hope," says Terkel, who jumped with editor Andre Schiffrin to The New Press when Random House dumped Schiffrin five years ago. The iconoclastic Terkel is not alone in thinking that the publishing industry took a drastic change for the worse during the corporate mergers of the eighties. Despite a profusion of small presses in Chicago and elsewhere, the hope for a full-fledged literary revival is a faint one. Small houses are ill equipped to compete with the marketing machines of such behemoths as Sony and Time-Warner. Writers need readers, and they're hard to find when books are distributed by hand.

Curt Johnson, a Chicago writer and publisher whose journal *December* published Raymond Carver's first story, recalls that when he came to Chicago in 1952, New York publishers would send scouts to the Drake hotel to meet unpublished writers and review manuscripts. Today, to have a realistic chance of getting published, an unknown writer must find an agent, and agents evaluate submissions based on what they think will sell. The writing game is, after all, a business, and no one is required to play.

But many still do, and even more are hoping for their chance to get in. Every day, in writing workshops and classes around the city, instructors such as Rob Fromberg—a writer who has published some 25 stories in literary journals, makes his living as editor of a health-care magazine, and moonlights as head of a small press, Fine Line Books—are helping would-be writers find their voice. The few who do will happily add theirs to the collection of voices that has been an important part of Chicago's history. Wish them luck; they'll need it.

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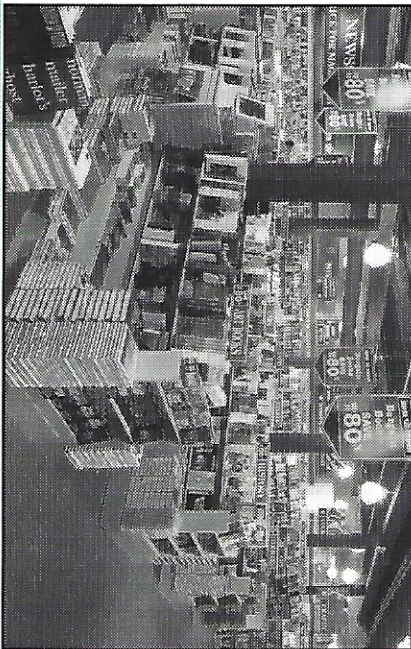
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