

Alma My Ma

A paean to the Chicago Public Library, where one of America's most celebrated writers honed his craft

By David Mamet



photos courtesy of Chicago Public Library

The author meets his readers during an October 13 program at Chicago Public Library.

My alma mater is the Chicago Public Library. I got what little educational foundation I got in the third-floor reading room, under the tutelage of a Coca-Cola sign.

I somehow came across a copy of *Main Street*, and I was stunned to find descriptions of things and emotions I had seen and felt—the wind on the prairies, a longing.

I came to the library as a young man, wandering in the open stacks. I read all of Sinclair Lewis, and a book jacket mentioned Willa Cather, so I read all of Willa Cather, and then another book took me to another Midwestern writer, and then to the Chicago writers. Theodore Dreiser became and remains my hero. He wrote about those things that I, as a young man, was experiencing every day—loneliness, the need to find work, to make money, to fight my way in, in short, to understand.

The spirit of Chicago permeated those books: Frank Norris writing about the Mercantile Exchange, Willa Cather about the arts, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright on the particular struggle of African Americans, Philip Roth and Saul Bellow on the particular plight of the Jews.

These stories read to me like the best of American news writing: who, what, where, when, and how. Like the newspaper, they were stories, in the main, about the working people, about living in a worker's town.

I sat in the reading room and read the novels, for that's all I read, one after another, three or four in a Sat-



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urday afternoon. I cut school and came downtown to sit at the long tables and read.

It didn't feel to me like education, and the novels, I came to realize later, didn't feel to me like literature, the awarding of which appellation is, I understand, the province of education.

The horror of my life, in those days, was "the Chicago Public Schools Report Card, Benjamin C. Willis, Superintendent." The report card was in a buff envelope similar to those glued into the back of the books I read at the public library and that other great venue of education, the Chicago Transit Authority. And those great Chicago stories were associated with the particular sway of the el train, the cigarette smoke and the fumes on the buses, the hot radiator and urine stink of the waiting rooms on the Illinois Central Railroad.

My heroes were and are the freethinkers, the shade-tree mechanics or philosophers, who stripped it down to the metal and could explain their ideas in a paragraph: Clarence Darrow, Thorstein Veblen, Vachel Lindsay, Abraham Lincoln, who walked these actual streets. Chicago, it was said in the years after the Civil War, was the first American city.

I think that we in Chicago, in our love of our heritage, have something more of the European about us. When I was a kid we all pointed out the corner of Holy Name Cathedral where the shots went wild when they tried to get Dion O'Bannion, the spot on Clark Street where

they threw the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, the place in Lincoln Park where the police started taking names in 1968. And the readers remember the stone lions outside the library from Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door*; the Fine Arts Building featured in both Dreiser and Cather, the bridges cropping up in every novel of a hundred years, and Philip Roth in *Letting Go*, who reminds us that everything—proposal, divorce, meditation, re-creation, confession—takes place at the Lake.

NEWSPAPERS WITHOUT GOVERNMENT

Thomas Jefferson said that given the choice of government without newspapers or newspapers without a government he would choose the latter, for the newspaper was the abstract and brief chronicle of its time.

I fear that 220 years on, it is less so. The amalgamation of the press and its horizontal and vertical integration into that which we know as the "media" has weakened the intellectual life of the country. By intellectual I do not mean writers such as myself and academics pontificating, but rather the free flow of ideas. For the American people are pretty good at the free exchange of ideas.

My dad loved Chicago in that quiet way most of us do, as a man loves his family. If you asked him, "Do you love your family?" he might look at you askance, and respond, "Well, of course." And Chicago, my dad always made the point, was a workers' town.

The workers—and if I may, we workers—have always been rather good at the free exchange of ideas. On the job, we most probably do not know the political orientation of the man or woman next to us, and we would consider it impolite to inquire. We observe their character—that is to say, simply, we watch how they behave and we form our opinions of them based on that good test: How are they on the job? And if they comment on the political situation, that comment is most likely couched with reserve and without partisanship. For on the job, we know we have to work together, and we discuss the world around us, searching for the unity of opinion, stating our ideas with reserve, open to new interpretation.

This is a great, great country we live in, and it was and is built by simple working people with a better idea: George Pullman, Harriet Tubman, Muddy Waters, Bill Gates, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Louis B. Mayer, Abraham Lincoln, the common people whose better ideas were adopted by their fellows—sometimes after monumental strife—and went on to influence the world.

America is not a melting pot, thank God. Those of us with a racial, a religious, a geographic heritage love and revere that heritage, as is correct. It's called filial piety, and it makes the country strong. It's not a melting pot, but it is a laboratory. And since our revolution it has been the laboratory of the world.

How did it become so? Through the free exchange of free ideas. Every advance, every innovation in industry, science, or art, builds upon the work of those who have gone before, which is the common store. That worth, that



The old central library, now the Chicago Cultural Center, where David Mamet honed his craft.

common store, is the library.

The media exists to enflame us, and I hold no brief—at least in the liberal arts—for that which calls itself Higher Education. The library is, and has always been, our national schoolhouse.

At a dark point several years ago, the government sent up a trial balloon: It announced it was considering obtaining all the records of all bookstores to see who was reading what.

An acquaintance of mine, owner of a bookstore in Montpelier, Vermont, took his files into the parking lot and burned them. This, to me, was a profound and courageous statement, for when and if the government controls what we can read, America, as we have known it, is finished. And it makes no difference if the particular government inquiring is or seems benign—once we establish that principle, once we make the American

people afraid to read, the laboratory of the world is dead.

The computer presents itself as a tool of increased literacy and communication. The jury is out. It may very well prove, in retrospect, to have been the death of both literacy and communication, for if information can be centrally controlled (and it seems it can), it can and most probably will be altered.

The information on the computer is just electrons, or whatever they are, on a screen. Where might one go to find out if the information was correct, to seek out an opposing view? To the library—an uncontrolled, nonjudgmental, open, inviting compendium of wisdom.

My highest desire as a kid was to write. It never occurred to me that books I had written could take their place alongside those of my heroes, but it seems that that has come to pass, and I must thank the institution which then, for me, and now, for others, makes such accomplishment possible. 📖

CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY HONORS MAMET, RAISES HALF A MILLION

The Chicago Public Library Foundation marked its 20th anniversary with an October 12 fundraiser honoring David Mamet that garnered a record \$525,000 in support for the library. Presented with the Carl Sandburg Literary Award, Mamet credited the library and the education he received in the reading room of the old central library (now the Chicago Cultural Center) for his accomplishments as a writer. The article accompanying this sidebar is adapted from his acceptance speech.

David Mamet first gained recognition as a playwright for a trio of off-Broadway plays in 1976: *The Duck Variations*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, and *American Buffalo*. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1984 for his play *Glengarry Glen Ross*. He received Academy Award nominations for his script for the 1982 film *The Verdict* and in 1998 for *Wag the Dog*. Born in 1947 in the Chicago suburb of Flossmoor, Illinois, Mamet told *American Libraries* that everything he

had accomplished as a writer was the result of the time he spent at the library.

At the same event, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley received a Library Champion Award for “his strong personal commitment to and advocacy for Chicago’s libraries and reading,” and Blue Balliett, author of *Chasing Vermeer* (Scholastic, 2004) and other books for young adults, received the foundation’s 21st Century Award.



Mayor Daley and Blue Balliett

courtesy of Chicago Public Library

Some 500 library supporters attended the bash in the Harold Washington Library Center’s Winter Garden atrium. The CPL foundation funds the library’s summer reading program, the “One Book, One Chicago” community reading initiative, the Chicago Book Festival, the “Teachers in the Library” homework-help program, and “CyberNavigators and Equal Access to Technology,” an effort to close the digital divide for all Chicagoans.